

BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY: Eugene Kaneshiro

"Like any family corporation or any family business, we all start from the bottom. My role was, we do anything and everything that's necessary. I think, somewhere along the line my father told me, 'You're going to become one of the highest paid busboys in town.' And I think he was right because I think he knew that everybody had to learn everything when you are a part of the ownership. I think my father was an interesting teacher. He never sat down anybody and lectured. But sometimes his comments maybe sounds like he's kidding, but he had a strong message."

Eugene Kaneshiro, eldest of three sons, was born to Fred Toshio and Beatrice Kaneshiro in 1945. Born and raised in Honolulu, Hawai'i, he attended Island Paradise School, St Louis High School, and McKinley High School. A 1963 graduate of McKinley, he also attended the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa and the College of Commerce.

He spent part of his childhood in and around the family-run Columbia Inn in Chinatown. Starting in the mid-1960s, he became part of Columbia Inn's management at Kapi'olani Boulevard – often assigned to do almost anything and everything that required his attention.

Following his father's death in 1981, he and other family members continued to operate their restaurants in Honolulu and Waimalu until the businesses were sold in the mid-1980s.

For the last fourteen years, Eugene Kaneshiro has been director of the school lunch program for the state's department of education. He and his family reside in Honolulu.

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ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Eugene Kaneshiro (EK)

Honolulu, O'ahu

October 10, 2002

BY: Michi Kodama-Nishimoto (MK)

MK: This is an interview with Mr. Eugene Kaneshiro in Honolulu, O'ahu on October 10, 2002. The interviewer is Michiko Kodama-Nishimoto

So, to start today's interview, when and where were you born?

EK: I was born in Honolulu, and I believe we were on Miller Street where the [State of Hawai'i] Department of Education building is currently. And, born at Queen's Hospital, so that's right in that neighborhood. Nineteen forty-five, is when I was born.

MK: And what's your mother's name?

EK: Beatrice Kaneshiro, her maiden name was Maeshiro.

MK: And your father's name?

EK: Fred Toshio Kaneshiro.

MK: Based on what you've heard, what do you know about your mom's family background and her early life?

EK: My mother came from a very large family, I believe they had about eight or nine siblings. She was born in Kunia, but they moved to Wai'anae. And the last place that she told me they lived was Mikilua Camp in Wai'anae. I've tried going back there, but there's nothing there on Lualualei Road. She doesn't remember too much about where that was in the camp, but she did say it was walking distance to the ocean, where they used to sneak off and go swimming. So, it's probably one or two miles from the shore in the Lualualei area. From what I was told, it was in a sugar plantation camp that they grew up.

MK: What has she told you about your maternal grandmother and grandfather?

EK: Her father died at a fairly young age. She always said that he had cirrhosis of the liver, but I'm not really sure about that. He used to love to make his own beer. My grandmother, I knew until I was into my late teens, because she was still alive. We did see her quite often, so you know, she used to be known as *Baban*, I guess everybody called her "*Baban*." They lived in the Kapahulu area. And she was one of those types that could stick anything in the ground and it would grow. I had the good fortune of knowing

my grandmother—not my grandfather, but my grandmother—fairly well. Knowing that she had a lot of children, apparently she probably worked really hard to raise that family by herself because her husband died early.

MK: Your maternal grandmother, was she ever involved in any sort of restaurant work or anything like that?

EK: No, not that I know of. It was mostly, you know, I really don't know if she had an occupation or not. I think she was predominantly raising the family, and how, I don't know. Of course, my mom had older brothers and sisters who worked and probably supported each other. I don't really know that much about my maternal grandmother other than the fact that I knew her when I was young. She taught me how to grow radish and things like that. But, not in the restaurant business at all.

MK: And then, what have you been told about your father's family background?

EK: Very complicated family. My father and his brothers and one sister were of the same father, but they had different mothers. In the restaurant, my father and his oldest brother [Gentaro Kaneshiro], who was a half-brother, had the same father, different mothers. The Kaneshiro family started out in Hakalau and then moved to Honolulu prior to 1941, World War II, and was there in the Alapa'i area for many, many years. My grandfather went back to Okinawa before the war and died there. I'm not really sure exactly when, but I believe it was during the Okinawan invasion in 1945 or thereabouts. That part I'm not really sure exactly what had happened, I don't have any confirmation. However, I guess that was always his desire to go back to Okinawa. But my father and all of his siblings having been more niseis with the exception of his oldest brother, the half-brother, all felt that they were Americans, I guess. So, they never had any desire to go to Okinawa for any reason.

MK: In the Kaneshiro family, who was the first to get involved in restaurant work?

EK: Had to be Gentaro Kaneshiro who is the oldest and the half-brother to all of the other siblings. He was the first to leave Hakalau, from my understanding, and began working in different restaurants in and around Honolulu. And then, eventually, shall we say, sent for the rest of the family and they all came to Honolulu. Not sure of the years. However, my father was just about ready to enter intermediate school because he did go to Hakalau Elementary School in Hakalau, and then went to Central Intermediate, and eventually McKinley High School and graduated from McKinley High School. He was the first of the family to actually graduate from high school. He also attended Japanese[-language] School on Fort Street, I guess it's the Honpa Hongwanji Japanese school. At the same time, he worked in Frankie's Café as a dishwasher, along with his other siblings like my Aunt Mitsu.

MK: And this Frankie's Café was founded by?

EK: I don't know the true history of the founding of Frankie's Café, but my uncle Gentaro eventually became a partner in the ownership of that restaurant. The restaurant was already standing and it was already named, you know, and Gentaro, when he became a citizen in the late [19]50s or thereabouts, he took the name Frank as his American name, I guess you would call it. That's why he's known as Frank Gentaro Kaneshiro, after that restaurant Frankie's Café. Because I think a lot of people referred to him as Frankie, something along that line. I guess that restaurant was the jumping-off point for the

Kaneshiro family in that that's where Gentaro, among other restaurants that he worked in, got his taste of ownership of a restaurant. I guess that eventually led to the partnership between Gentaro, who was the oldest half-brother, and my father, who was the youngest in the family. They probably had a bond somewhere along the line and they entered a partnership and opened the original Columbia Inn on Beretania Street.

MK: You mentioned that Gentaro worked in a number of restaurants. I know that American Café is one of them. What other restaurants did he work at?

EK: That's a real good question, I don't know. I only know of American Café and that Frankie's Café and I don't know if there was anything between. I don't know if he had any work at the Kewalo Inn, that famous Kewalo Inn that Harry Uehara had at one time. That's a mystery to me at this point.

MK: Frank Gentaro Kaneshiro, he's an issei who came to Hawai'i. Being an issei your first language is Okinawan or Japanese. How, in your opinion, was he able to conduct business?

EK: You know, I guess when you're thrown and you're immersed into a society that speaks English, you're going to have to real quickly adapt. The pidgin English, the famous pidgin English of Hawai'i that was adopted by many, many people, many immigrants, even English-speaking people so they can at least mutually converse. I think, it's maybe typical of how others were able to get along with each other and work together and so forth. I guess, self-taught because I've never known my uncle Gentaro—we call him "Big Uncle" like every other family has a big uncle—I don't remember him ever going to school to learn English. So I think you learn as you go along. And, you use words that come from different languages, a mix of Hawaiian and mix of the Chinese language and some Filipino words and, of course, Japanese- and Okinawan-*go*. You find that it's a means to communicate and it's the easiest way. I think it's very similar to the situation today where you have Korean and Vietnamese and Thai immigrants coming over here and opening businesses by first working in restaurants and doing whatever needs to be done, earning a living, and eventually becoming successful in their own right, due to hard work and a lot of hard knocks that they had taken throughout. I think our story and the evolution of the Kaneshiro family going from the plantation to the restaurant business is very typical of many other families that went through it, be it Okinawans, Japanese, Chinese, Koreans, and now the Filipinos emerging as a very strong business-oriented group. I don't think we're that much different.

MK: You mentioned that there was a bond between the older brother, Gentaro, and Toshi, your father. How would you characterize that relationship?

EK: I think that in itself is an interesting story because a lot of people, when they go into business with family, there's a lot of misunderstanding and jealousy and a quest for power and all those kinds of things. But, having an older brother who looked after a whole group of siblings, he became a father image or father figure to the other siblings. And, usually the youngest one is the one that needs the most help, and I could just picture—you know, I'm guessing because I'm the oldest of the three sons that my father had and I always am on the lookout for my two younger brothers, one two years below me, one six years below me. Every year we still get together and I force that issue. Every year I take care of my two brothers by just getting together with them. Both of them live on the Mainland, so we go, a big excuse, we go to the drag races. But with that same feeling, I believe, my big uncle Gentaro, I think, had a special soft spot in his heart to

look after my father who was the youngest. There is a significant age difference, I think it's like about maybe fifteen years difference. It's almost a generation apart, you know.

I think the beauty of it is, that partnership that they entered was not purely business. I think it really transcended the whole family feeling. They didn't get into each other's hair, they all knew where their standing was. Gentaro had certain talents and ability and a sense of business. My father did, too, but he was the workhorse and was willing to work hard regardless. They shared everything. When they were in the partnership, they not only ran restaurants, but they had built apartments together and purchased land and some property, and so forth, and so on. But, their primary business was in the restaurant business. This is where, Gentaro, I think, sensed that my father, Toshi, had the business sense to take care of the front end of the business, the public relations, the management of a business, but with the strong sense of guidance from Gentaro.

And I think that in itself helped stabilize the business to a point where my father and our family and Gentaro and his family, we all worked in the business. We were partners in it, as a corporation later, but we are still a family. Even though we had sold the restaurant and, in fact, the restaurant out at Waimalu didn't do as well, which eventually led to us selling the restaurants, both of them, the family is still together. I think it came from Gentaro's leadership of the family and his feeling and my father's willingness to understand where his position was in the family. A lot of families they don't speak to each other and they don't see each other until they have to go to a funeral because one of the other family members dying because of money problems and partnership problems and misunderstanding as to where their standing is and so forth. But, our family [gets along], I think it's because of Gentaro's leadership in his own way. You don't have to be able to speak English well to make that happen, it's really by demonstration and the willingness to give and take on all sides.

And, so then, when Gentaro's sons, Frenchy and Robert, were in the business with us, my father always pulled me aside and said, "Remember, we are family first and we run a business together. My older brother and I have run this business and run it well, and therefore, there should not be any disagreements and if there is, you work it out." To this very day, my cousin Frenchy and his brother Bobby, and of course, my other cousins, we're able to see each other often and enjoy and reminisce about the old days, the fun times, and what lies in the future.

MK: You mentioned that there are other siblings besides your dad and your uncle, Gentaro, what were their involvement, if any, in the Kaneshiro restaurant business?

EK: My uncle Floyd was the number two brother and I'm not really exactly sure what role he played, if any, in the Columbia Inn. I don't believe he was involved in the Columbia Inn at all. He did have his own restaurant, however, I understand, but I don't know the history of that. The other brother, Matthew, we used to call him "Uncle Oscar." I don't know where "Oscar" came from, but I understand his name was Matthew Isamu, I think. I understand he worked in the restaurant at one time because I can recall my mother telling me that he used to be the one that used to teach all the waitresses how to make chocolate sundaes and banana splits and things like that. He was kind of a gruff person and was really just working at the restaurant. My understanding, he was not part of the ownership. But eventually, he left the restaurant and went to work for Kodak Hawai'i where had a longstanding career at Kodak of Hawai'i and retired from that. But, by the time I was a teen, I know for sure that he was not in the restaurant business at that point, in the [19]60s, but it must have been much earlier than that in the [19]40s probably or post

World War II.

MK: You mentioned that your uncle Floyd had a restaurant, would you know the name of that restaurant or where it might have been?

EK: I really don't know, I have to look it up. I understand that he had his own restaurant, too, or was a partner in a restaurant. But, I don't believe that it had anything to do with the Columbia Inn. That, I'm not sure.

MK: The other siblings involved in the restaurant is your aunty Mitsu or Elsie Teruya.

EK: Elsie Teruya is the youngest—not the youngest, she's the sibling above my father. I believe they were about six years apart in age. I know my aunty Mitsu had mentioned to me that she worked at Frankie's Café, and then years later she worked at the Columbia Inn, but in what capacity, I'm not really sure. In the later years, however, when the Columbia Inn eventually went to Kapi'olani Boulevard, and this is the late [19]60s, early [19]70s, she did work for us and was a cashier during the daytime. Although was not part of the ownership of the restaurant, did work, and she was kind of a well-known person with the breakfast and the lunch crowd because she primarily worked early morning and by lunchtime, before lunch, her shift was done. Not only reliable, but she knew her customers and the customers knew her, and she was a really nice person to have greeting people at the restaurant. I must say, there's some prejudice because my aunty Mitsu, being the only sister of all the Kaneshiro family, she happened to just be one of my favorite auntys of all the relatives that I have. Only because of her demeanor and her, I don't know, naturally positive outlook in life. I don't know exactly how that has come about, knowing some of the hard knocks that she had to go through, but she has an interesting outlook. She was not part of the ownership, but she did work at the restaurant. I believe she worked at the original Columbia Inn on Beretania. That, I don't know. I guess that we can leave for my mother.

MK: And then, what was your mother's role—from your viewpoint—what was your mother's role in the pre-1960s Columbia Inn?

EK: This was the old Columbia Inn located at 116 Beretania Street at the corner of Kamanuwai Lane, more known as the "Tin Can Alley," where the burlesque theatre is and all that. My mom worked in that restaurant. In fact, she worked at Frankie's Café along with her sisters. They came from Wai'anae and began working at that restaurant. I'm not really sure how exactly my father met up with her, but it had to be there, is my thoughts and maybe I should ask her. Having worked there, then they were working at Columbia Inn together, planning to open that restaurant. In fact, one story is that they were in the restaurant cleaning up the place on the day that the bombs were dropping at Pearl Harbor. You know, and the career there at Columbia Inn, Beretania Street, started. They were living at Miller Lane. In fact, with all the Kaneshiros for that matter. She was a waitress, and practically did everything in that restaurant except cook. My mom's sisters—two sisters, I believe—worked there also at some point. With them having so many siblings, slowly they were coming and moving from Wai'anae into Honolulu. And, obviously needed to work, so they eventually—family gives family jobs, so she had the inside track over there.

MK: Were there any other relatives working at the early Columbia Inn? Your mother, your mother's sisters, your uncle . . . ?

EK: Yeah, my uncle who was my mother's brother was the cook there, Jason Maeshiro. My uncle George Uehara, who was married to my mother's youngest sister, I think, pulled a stint over there also at the Columbia Inn-Beretania. But, eventually, he became the chef at the new location at Kapi'olani, the Columbia Inn, Top of the Boulevard. I should say that the Columbia Inn at Beretania was known as the "Gem in the Slums." It was known as "Columbia Inn, the Gem in the Slums." It was like a little slogan and you could find it on our letterhead and stuff because it was located in the middle, crossroads between Chinatown and all the rooming houses and all that in that whole area. It was kind of like a gem. It ran twenty-four hours after the war and got a bar open in 1950. But, getting back to people working there in that restaurant, my Uncle George who became our chef at the Top of the Boulevard at Kapi'olani, my uncle Jason, my aunty Alice who's my mother's sister, and my aunty Mildred, who was my mother's sister, I believe, all worked there at one time or another.

MK: Who were non-family members who worked at the restaurant?

EK: (Laughs) Oh gosh, obviously there were. Not everybody was interested in working in the restaurant so there were some who didn't work in the restaurant at all. I guess by choice, if they wanted to, I believe the door is open for them to come on in and work. Without even having a employees' meeting, when you have that kind of family, you don't really need to have an employees' meeting to get everybody motivated to work. It was a natural thing, it was everybody has to *kōkua* otherwise the restaurant will fail. They didn't have to say much about, "Eh you're not doing your share," or whatever. My understanding is any family member who did work gave a hundred and ten percent and probably more than the regular employees that worked there.

MK: How long did family workers stay?

EK: Quite some time. Yeah. Of course, my cousins, my cousin Frenchy was there from the beginning to the end. His brother joined us after college, but didn't stay too long, but he was instrumental in becoming part of the business when Columbia Inn moved to the Kapi'olani location. All of us were involved in a restaurant called College Inn that was located at University and Dole. We had that in the late [19]50s, I believe, for a few years, and eventually sold it. But, when we moved the restaurant to Kapi'olani, when Columbia Inn moved to Kapi'olani Boulevard, we were known as "Top of the Boulevard." My uncle George Uehara who was married to Betty, my mother's youngest sister, became an integral part of the restaurant. Not part of the ownership, but he was the chef of the restaurant. My mother's sister, his wife, Betty, was our office manager and helped us with most of the office administrative things—type menus, and all those kinds of things. Eventually her daughter got involved in the restaurant business too, Judy Uehara Koza. Koza was her last name. It's really, truly a family business. It extended out from the Kaneshiros to my mother's side, the Maeshiro side of the family, and some of them got involved. Not necessarily in the ownership, but more in the working of the restaurant as employees.

MK: Among the non-family workers, like island-style we call people who are not related to us auntys and uncles. As a kid, how was your relationship with the non-family workers?

EK: There were many people who worked a long, long time that started long before I was born. The restaurant, the Columbia Inn, original Columbia Inn, opened in 1941 December. At that time, the chef over there was Shima—Seikichi Shimabukuro—and when we retired he had forty-one years. He moved from the Columbia-Beretania Street to

Columbia Inn-Kapi'olani. I believe he had over forty-one years of service.

We had a waitress that worked the midnight shift with pretty close to thirty-something years of service working the midnight shift. You know, that was Rose Honda. Then her two daughters worked for us for a while in the restaurant, one of them becoming our head waitress.

We had bartenders that came from the old restaurant and a number of other waitresses that came that had twenty and thirty years of service. So watching this one whole generation of people working for our family, our family business, I don't know if you have that kind of situation today in this day and age. But during those times, it was very traditional. I can remember [in] 1976, when the United States celebrated the bicentennial, 200 years, we put a big ad in the newspaper and we showed the pictures of every single employee, their position, and the number of years of service. I forgot how many total years of combined service, but I believe at that time the average years of service was like eighteen years or something like that. So, there was really an extended family. Although, when we moved the business Beretania Street to Kapi'olani, we went from a fairly small restaurant to a very large restaurant. When we say small, at Beretania Street, according the restaurant standards, it was a significant restaurant of note.

MK: How big was it in terms of how many people could be accommodated, how many employees?

EK: I believe the restaurant at Beretania Street probably had a seating capacity of about a hundred and twenty-five. When we moved to the Kapi'olani restaurant, we were looking at about more than a hundred fifty to a hundred sixty seats. So, it was a fairly large restaurant at Beretania Street, but when we moved to Kapi'olani we incorporated. That's one significant change. It became a corporation rather than a partnership. It's, from the business standpoint, significant. However, the true feeling of how you run the restaurant was still under the leadership of my father and his older brother. But then, the chef we hired is my father's brother-in-law, that's my mother's younger sister's husband.

It became a little bit more organized and more corporate in a sense, in that we actually had an executive chef working for us, who had talents way beyond what we originally had at the Beretania Street restaurant and was able to meet the challenges of any changes in the industry, offered real good-tasting food, was able to help us produce a profit of note, and really, became a leader in food. Although food was very traditional, that kind of family-style restaurant, he introduced some things that became industry standards. I can't think of too many, but it's amazing the kind of things he—in a restaurant like that he had *mahimahi* and he put a meunière sauce on it. Little bit of, not necessarily French influence, but continental. The gravy was not a gravy, it was in some cases was a sauce where there's a difference in the preparation and all that. And, along with that, the traditional things like pig feet soup and oxtail soup, those kinds of things were offered. Interestingly, we had saimin on the menu, but he never used to want to serve saimin during the lunchtime or dinnertime because he said, "We're not a saimin stand." This is our chef who had, I guess, enough talent to bring to us different kinds of foods as daily specials and he said we don't need to be a saimin stand to bring people in.

MK: This chef would be George Uehara?

EK: George Uehara.

MK: I know in the earlier days, say, in Gentaro's days or your father's days many of the young Orokun-*chu*, who became cooks and owners of restaurants, learned by just doing *minarai*, just watching . . .

EK: Just watching.

MK: . . . at American Café or elsewhere. When it came to George Uehara's time, where did he gain his abilities and skills?

EK: He worked in many restaurants all over town including restaurants in Waikīkī. I don't recall him telling me he worked in any hotel restaurants, but I know that he did work in a number of restaurants in and around Waikīkī. He, I guess, learned by watching and learned by somebody teaching him something, and then he puts his own little twist to it and it's amazing. But then, if you look at the menu of the Columbia Inn, your generic menu, it looks generic like the menus from other restaurants that was owned and operated by Okinawans. Predominantly, so-called American foods, full complete meals, soup to nuts, and so many restaurants did their own baking for baking pies and stuff for desserts, which became signature items and so forth and so on. But I believe George was self-taught. I don't believe his father was a chef, the father was more restaurant owner and manager, to my knowledge. I do know that George's brother was a chef also, became a chef for the Nagamines over at Flamingo, and prior to that he was with the Zippy's chain, became their executive chef.

MK: What restaurant did George Uehara's father own?

EK: George's father owned, originally, the Kewalo Inn, which was like another significant restaurant like the American Café. I guess when he retired there he had the Evergreen restaurant on Kapi'olani Boulevard across from KGMB-TV on Kapi'olani. That was a significant restaurant. That was a restaurant where you go there when you had an occasion. There was a tablecloth, waiters wore white shirts and bow ties, very formal kind of—you go there to dine, not to eat. Columbia Inn is a place where you could go to dine, but more than likely you'd go to eat. It's good food, hearty food, but the Evergreen was a class restaurant, along the lines of the old Tropics restaurants that the Guerreros ran.

MK: Going back to the pre-1960s Columbia Inn, what were the hours like?

EK: I don't know exactly when they went twenty-four hours, but during the war I was told blackout was enforced and therefore blackout was up until the war ended or maybe just prior to the war ended. And then after that, I'm not really sure when they went twenty-four hours, but I do know that they opened the bar around 1950 and that became a major change in the restaurant, in terms of how they operated. But that restaurant, the "Gem in the Slums," in the middle of this rough tough neighborhood operated twenty-four hours.

MK: You said that the bar was like a major change, in what way was it a major change?

EK: Well, they had to hire a doorman and bouncer. Liquor always introduces a very different change in operation. And therefore, I think it had to have a little bit more personal and closer management of business. I think my father is the one that really was able to make that major adjustment, and saw, and knew instinctively how to operate a bar operation along with a restaurant. Profitability is much greater when you do have a bar, so I guess that was one of the motivating factors of opening a bar, so it becomes a restaurant bar.

But the bar really was a separate operation, although you can serve beer in the dining room and so forth. It was really like two different rooms connected with a thoroughfare that kind of flowed into the dining room.

MK: You were saying that it raised profitability having a bar?

EK: Oh yeah.

MK: How is that?

EK: The margin on serving a drink is much more than the profit margin on food. I think the major thing that happened in that bar is my father renovated that area where he put the bar in, besides tables and booths, put this round table in that's kind of a high—you have high stools and it's not at regular table level. That infamous round table became a conversation table. Somehow, it had six stools, but usually you had maybe eight people squeezed around the darn thing and for some reason that round table brought the best of conversation out and sometimes could be very mundane conversation, but nevertheless, it was entertaining to people. Therefore, I think my father realized that if you set the atmosphere, people will entertain themselves rather than have to bring in entertainment to a bar. You don't need musicians, you don't need pool table, you don't need pinball machine, you don't need all those kinds of things. I think my father had that real knack of being able to judge character and knew how to promote himself, promote the restaurant, promote the business.

MK: In those days, what kind of food did people associate with the old Columbia Inn at Beretania?

EK: I'm going to say that the menu looks very much like restaurants that preceded the Columbia Inn and was successful with a small little different twist here and there. But if you look at the menu and you went and looked probably at the old Frankie's Café menu that goes even further back in the [19]30s, you're going to see the same items. Beef liver, veal cutlets, hamburger steak, spaghetti, very standard things. The closest thing to Okinawan food was pig feet soup, but the popularity of pig feet soup in the restaurant didn't come about until later, my understanding. But, the menu at the original Columbia Inn back in the [19]40s and [19]50s, I recall the [19]50s when I used to go there, it was the best hamburger steak I ever tasted with fried onions and brown gravy. But you could find that same thing at the Flamingo, at the Alakea Grill, and Likelike, Wisteria, and places like that. So the menus weren't that significantly different. There were certain specials that they may have had, I can't recall, but just a little twist on it.

MK: Was there some sort of signature-type dish associated with the old Columbia Inn?

EK: One of the things that my father introduced was the sizzling platter.

MK: Oh.

EK: He had a rib steak on a sizzling platter. My understanding is the sizzling platter was around, it was available in the industry, but he milked it for everything it's worth. I remember having seen a real big sign outside, backlit with florescent lights, and it says "Sizzling Rib Steak." And they used to overheat that platter and when they put the steak on it after it was broiled, and you brought it out into the dining room, you practically smoked out the whole dining room. (MK chuckles.) But imagine this restaurant that seats about a hundred and twenty-five people and you see this platter on a tray coming . . .

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDE TWO

MK: Okay, you're talking about the sizzling platter.

EK: So, we were talking about the sizzling platter. I can remember that the sizzling platter coming out of the kitchen on the tray that the waitress was carrying and the thing is just a huge plume of smoke trailing. Then, everybody turning around, looking and seeing who's ordering this sizzling rib steak. It was a show in itself. Now this is a small little hole in the wall restaurant in the middle of the slums and my father is, I guess, adding a little showmanship to this thing. And, you talk about whetting appetites. (MK chuckles.) "Next time I come here, I'm going to try that." You know, local people, they don't like these flashy things, and yet, it became like, "Wow, who's ordering that?" and it was very significant. I can remember that. And, those kind of things are what my father played with to promote the restaurant.

MK: You've been saying that your dad was very skilled at promoting the restaurant. What other things did he do for that Beretania Columbia Inn to draw customers in, to get them to buy stuff?

EK: He did a whole lot of things, but prior to him really truly managing the front end, he was trained as a meat-cutter in the army. He had to serve his time in the army after the war ended. His draft was deferred until after the war ended. Otherwise, he and Gentaro wouldn't be able to run the restaurant because Gentaro was not a citizen. They also deferred internment for him because the restaurant became essential to the war effort, that's my understanding. So, the partnership between Gentaro and my father Toshi survived because one, Gentaro being an alien was not interned, and two, my father's draft was deferred until after the war. They were able to operate the Columbia Inn during the war. And I believe Gentaro tried his best to run the front of the house, but with his limited English, he was able to successfully accommodate all of the needs of the customers. My father was in the kitchen.

And then, the roles kind of like changed, in the later years, before moving the restaurant from Downtown to Kapi'olani. My father eventually moved to the front of the house, leaving the kitchen chores to people that they hired. And then, Gentaro took more like a semi-silent partner arrangement and allowed my father the leeway to operate the restaurant, manage the restaurant, let's say. I think the transition between the two partners, the two brothers, and understanding that one had the knack of doing something better than the other. And therefore, without any perceived jealousy, without any power struggle, both of them could say, "Yes, I'm the owner of the restaurant. We both are." Then, my father, looking at now a restaurant with so many mouths to feed, the staff, the family, and everybody else, I guess found that in order for the restaurant to succeed, it not only relied on the menu and good food, but you need to tell the whole world that you're there.

MK: I know that you mentioned that he had a lit-up sign, had that kind of fancy, gimmicky presentation of the steak, and then he had ads.

EK: Newspaper ads. But he also involved himself and associated himself with other restaurant

owners and barkeepers and eventually became one of the founding members of the Honolulu Bar Owners Association or Bar and Restaurant Association, which was not the forerunner to the Hawai'i Restaurant Association, but just an organization of local barkeepers, predominantly in the downtown area. And I guess, maybe that's where my father learned a lot of from other restaurateurs. Because he never saw them as competitors, he always saw them like partners in the industry. And he taught me that. He always told me, "Our competitors are not the restaurants down the street, like the Flamingos and the Wisteria." And therefore, we have good relations with the Nagamines at Flamingos and the Asatos over at Wisteria and the Nakaharas over at the Alakea Grill, and the Nakos and the Hayashis over at Likelike, people like that. Simply because, my father's idea was, hey, we're in the same boat, man, we got to learn from each other or we're all going to sink. So, maybe, was he before his time? No, I don't think so, but I think he was right at the right time.

MK: And you said your father didn't consider these other restaurants as competitors, but all these businesses are also trying to gain customers from the same big population. What were the other restaurants that drew people like Columbia Inn in?

EK: I really don't know, but they all had their own thing going, I believe. Either location, or menu, but I can recall—I mean, who would put a slogan called the "Columbia Inn, the Gem in the Slum?" Why would somebody do that? But, that's how he viewed his restaurant. In trying to promote the restaurant, my father recognized early on that you cannot just be a restaurant that serves good food at a reasonable price, but you had to draw people in. I can recall he used to go down to United Press International, wherever they were located, and he used to actually get tear sheets from them of wire service stories and pictures from the wire services and he used to put it up in the front of the restaurant in the window. The people who used to live in that area, the neighborhood, was predominantly single Filipino men who worked at the cannery or as stevedores. A lot of Hawaiian, part-Hawaiian families that lived in that River Street, Kukui Street, Nu'uanu, Beretania, King Street, 'A'ala Park, that whole area there. And United Press International used to have a lot of interesting pictures that used to come over the wire service. Somehow he got his hands on those things and he used to put them up in the window. People used to stop and look.

And then inside the restaurant, every occasion, he used to dress the restaurant up. If it was Easter, he had Easter eggs and bunnies and stuff like that, and the people used to come in there. Imagine now, these are single Filipino men, who come from a foreign country, never knew what Easter was. And even if they did, American Easter is Easter eggs. Imagine when he's hanging what looked like autumn leaves, imagine Christmas decorations in a restaurant, that's typical. But, Fourth of July, he got flags and bunting and all those kinds of things. Cherry blossom, when you had the Cherry Blossom Festival he had cherry blossoms all over the place.

He had a sign says, "Go Dodgers, go!" My father became, in the early [19]50s, a Dodgers fan because everybody was rooting for the Yankees, so he took the underdog. (MK chuckles.) But he promoted the heck out of this "Go Dodgers, go." Hawai'i Islanders came to town in the late [19]50s. He didn't put, "Go Islanders, go!" He said, "No, my team is the Dodgers." and it's "Go Dodgers, go!" And people used to come in and tease him. Baseball season, he'd be walking around with a baseball hat, LA, Los Angeles Dodgers and so forth and so on.

But, all of these things are done to find an occasion to celebrate something. It was like in

Japan festival time, but festival time was year round for him. I can remember walking in the restaurant and seeing all these decorations, what's going on? He carried that over to the Kapi'olani restaurant with him, the "Go Dodgers, go" sign was still there, hanging every season. When the sign goes up, everybody knew that it was baseball season. When cherry blossom, you know these little things hanging from the ceiling with little cherry blossom plastic or papier-maché or whatever it is, how corny it was, it created a conversation piece, created an atmosphere. It created conversation for the waitresses so they can interact with the customers. So in-house promotion, in-house activities. He made people want to come there. I mean, this is with a limited budget, this is without any professional help, this is the fun things, I guess, that he kept himself amused with. I say "corny" because sometimes I used to, "Are we going to do that again?" you know, especially at the Kapi'olani restaurant where things were supposed to be a little more sophisticated, but no.

He said, "What are you talking about? Of course." That's how it grew.

In the later years, the likes of Frank Valenti and Ray Milici and other public relations, advertising guys of note, especially Ray Milici and Frank Valenti used to always refer to him as the dean of restaurant public relations. They say he wrote the book. My uncle Gentaro sensed that his younger brother, his partner, had that talent, you can call it, and allowed him to go with no question.

MK: Earlier you mentioned that your dad graduated from high school, right?

EK: That's right.

MK: Did you ever hear him wanting to have gone for more education or have entered another field? Obviously he was very successful in this field, it was a good fit, but did he at any time say he wanted to do something else?

EK: He never did say that directly to me. In fact, come to think of it, I never heard him say anything about wanting to go on to college. I remember one interesting conversation that he and I had one day, when he was describing to me about graduation. He graduated from McKinley High School, I think was Class of 1938, something like that. And, before he graduated he mentioned to the number two brother Floyd, "I'm going to graduate next week." something like that, or "I'm going to graduate soon. All my friends having party. We going make party for me or what?" He said something along that line.

And my uncle Floyd told him, "What do you mean party? You better throw us a party, we worked hard and we put you through school."

And he said, when he graduated nobody came to his graduation at McKinley High School. His friend gave him a *lei* because he had plenty *leis* on him. That night, my father was at Frankie's Café washing dishes. Sad commentary, maybe, I don't know, but that was how it was. My father didn't have any parents. He had his older brother Gentaro who was buried in work, trying to eke out a living. And, so I don't know if college was ever in anybody's mind or conversation.

I can recall him telling me that, oh my uncle, either Gentaro or Floyd, bought him a sports jacket because he needed that to attend Japanese School and Hongwanji. You had to wear a jacket. My father mentioned to me when he had either tonsillitis or appendicitis, I forgot which one now, either one, either end, when he was sick he recalled a

conversation between the two brothers that said, "This kid going cost us big money." Because he would have to get an operation. So, I don't know what was his aspirations were other than working in the restaurant.

But I had an interesting story relayed to me by a person who worked in the newspaper building, in the press. The *Advertiser* press was across the street from Frankie's Café on South Street where Kawaiaha'o Plaza is today. And for those people who worked in the press and the linotype, where they typeset the newspaper, they used to come out the side entrance of South Street, run across the street, and go through the back entrance of Frankie's Café. And they used to see Toshi, in his crewcut hair and pimples, and he used to be washing dishes there, and they all used to rub his head, "Hey Tosh." And they go into the dining room and eat. And on the way out, they go through the same way because that was the shortest route to the newspaper building. Years later, my father opened the Columbia Inn Kapi'olani and the same linotypists and pressmen who remember my father when he was a teen, they say, "Hey look now, the guy owns his own restaurant." Rags to riches or whatever kind of description you can make.

This guy Kenny, we used to call him "Short Pants," he used to be in the linotype, he said, "You know your father, he used to be washing dishes on Friday nights. We used to go to the Armory on Hotel Street for a big dance," the canteen they used to call it. After the canteen they all used to bring their dates and they used to go out eat, "And here your father washing dishes and us guys we were out dancing all night with our girlfriends." and so forth and so on. He said, "I can remember that." He said, "I never felt sorry for him, but I remember that." He told me.

So, my father was in the restaurant business from like early age. I don't know, he never talked much about it, that's the only word that I got from this guy Kenny, I forgot his last name, Kenichi something, and this other guy Yoichi Arakaki, they were linotypists in the press, putting the paper together. These guys were like, when we moved to Columbia Inn Kapi'olani, they were like twenty- and thirty- year employees, so they can remember that. There was a pressman, they call it the "Black Gang" the guys who actually run the press, they told me, "I know your father when he was a teenager." And somebody dug out from the morgue, where all the news-clippings, and they showed me one picture of my father at age thirteen or fourteen years old, he had a radio tied on to the handlebar of his bicycle and it says, "First bike radio." That thing was published in the newspaper. At that time, my father used to live in that area over there, Alapa'i Street, by where the Board of Water Supply is, across that there, the auto parts store. And these are all hearsay, but nevertheless, these are the kinds of things. And I don't know, maybe my father was destined to be in the media. Because he became like part of the media when he chose to move the Columbia Inn to the site of the old Times Grill.

MK: Before we get to that, you were saying that the advertising guys really admired your father's advertising skills and they called him a certain—what did they call him? The title . . .

EK: The dean of restaurant public relations. It's real informal thing, but nevertheless. I recall Ray Milici because I got to know Ray Milici in the later years in my own career, but then he used to mention that to me all the time.

But, this all started not when he moved to the Kapi'olani restaurant, where public relation played an even more important role in promoting the restaurant, but even in that small restaurant in the middle of the slums, where you wouldn't think that anybody would be

promoting the restaurant in that way. Was he ahead of his time? I say yes. Because maybe—I don't know of other restaurants in the area owned and operated by Okinawans and others, if they promoted their restaurant in the middle of the slum like he did. I mean, the "Gem in the Slums." A movie called, *Hell's Half Acre* starring Wendell Corey, was filmed in and around the restaurant because that's what the story was about, *Hell's Half Acre*. *Hell's Half Acre* was in that slum area. When the guy [location coordinator] who was looking for locations, he remembered the restaurant and remembered my father and his antics and everything else. He sent a letter to Columbia Inn, the Gem in the Slums, no address, and the letter was to ask if my father would like to be the caterer for that movie. They shut the restaurant down certain hours and all the cast and crew would come in only and eat and it was off-limits to all others, and so forth and so on. And they hired some of the cooks to be extras and other things like that. And, if it wasn't for that slogan, the guy would probably never remember that little hole in the wall, but it was significant enough that he felt that they could feed the cast and crew.

MK: And also, they shot around the restaurant?

EK: They shot in the back of the restaurant, but I don't believe they shot anything inside the restaurant.

MK: And the cooks were in there as extras?

EK: They were hired as extras. I remember one of the cooks was in a scene, where they were shooting craps in the alley and things like that. But not as a cook, no.

MK: I have to see that movie then.

(Laughter)

EK: However, it's something that my father had the knack of promoting even way back then.

MK: You were saying that even back in those days at the Beretania site, he was also known as sort of like an unofficial mayor of Chinatown.

EK: Being in the middle of the slums and middle of Chinatown really, Maunakea Street, you know, dead end at Beretania and went *makai* to the ocean, and Pauahi and Smith and on the other edge is River Street and all that. So essentially, that's all of Chinatown. There were many Chinese cultural clubs and they had their own *kung fu* instructor, and the martial arts, and the mah-jongg clubs and so forth and so on in and around Chinatown. But, it's more the societies, Chinese societies, Chinese clubs had their own meeting halls and so forth and so on. Well, they were regular patrons. Besides being business people in that Chinatown area, even in the evenings and at night, they used to be patronizing Columbia Inn because it was a place they felt very comfortable, apparently. And my father made it a point to be friends with them and make friends with them and promote his business to them.

I remember walking down Chinatown from Beretania Street straight down Maunakea to Bank of Hawai'i Market branch at King and Maunakea, and I can recall him stopping at almost every store saying hello to the owner and the keeper of the store. I can recall him stopping and shaking hands with people, going all the way down. He knew almost everybody and almost everybody knew him. Maybe I had the good fortune of looking exactly like my father, and I could walk around that whole Chinatown, and all the back alleys, and so forth and so on, and people used to know who I was because I look exactly

like my father. And the image that my father portrayed, and I guess his personality was a positive one, therefore they treated me like him.

I always tell the story about when I was a kid, my friend and I wanted to steal candy from this store in Tin Can Alley and we were planning it outside. We walked inside the store and the Chinese man recognized me and said, "Oh, you Toshi's boy, oh, come, what you like? Candy? Here, you can have, take whatever you like." I probably would've been killed if I was caught stealing candy from that store, but I wasn't even given an opportunity. The guy said, "Here, take what you want. Which candy you want?" And it's because that person probably came to the restaurant, made friends with my father and vice versa, or my father even patronized that guy's little store and so forth. And, I can clearly remember him telling me, "Which candy you like?" And he was ready to give me the candy instead of me stealing it. I don't think he knew that we were planning steal candy from him.

But, it's how he treated everybody in that area over there. And you know Chinese New Year? He invited all of the Chinese clubs with their dragons to end up a certain time in front of the Columbia Inn. Gave three, four cases of beer to the firemen and they brought their hook-and-ladder truck in the front there. And they had the Chinese society guys, he bought the fireworks and they joined two fifty-foot strings and made it a hundred foot long. The longest firecracker you ever seen hanging on a city and county's hook-and-ladder truck, and I can remember seeing couple cases of beer on the side of the truck, and here's this hook-and-ladder truck with this hundred-foot-long firecracker dangling. And my father in his Chinese skullcap and they were taking pictures of him lighting the thing up. I know this because I was a teen at that time, and the dragons used to—I had to help him decorate this flatbed truck that came from Fred's Produce and that became a stage in front of the restaurant, right on the street. Beretania, from River to Nu'uanu was closed off to traffic, and it was like a sea of people over there, I can just remember. Every Chinese club sent their best martial arts and they do the *kung fu* dance and the sword dance, and so forth and so on. You can see my father hanging the cabbage and the red paper, *licee*, and the dragons coming around.

What did that do? It reinforced his participation in Chinatown, it reinforced his willingness to relate to all of the Chinese shopkeepers and everybody else in that whole area. It was truly a gathering place for everyone, including all the gamblers and the crooks. The cops on one side, and the business guys that came down there. You know the Beretania Follies? It attracted not the dregs of Honolulu, but it was a legitimate burlesque theatre of class. And people from all walks of life from the professionals to—and my father recognized that. When there was a new star stripper come in for a two-week engagement, that was a big thing. Search lights at the top of the street, the lane, Tin Can Alley. He used to send flowers on opening night. It was a big thing in the middle of the slums, and the Beretania Follies.

MK: I know you had this anecdote before about you'd have the policeman who would be taking off his . . .

EK: Oh, the cops used to take their shirt off because they didn't want to portray that they were cops, they're a customer. Crooks on the other side . . .

(Laughter)

. . . of the restaurant. Neutral turf, they got to eat somewhere. It truly was like that, they

never bothered each other inside the restaurant.

MK: You mentioned that walking through Chinatown and you said your dad probably patronized the store and that the store owner there probably patronized the restaurant. In terms of like getting supplies for the store, the meats, the produce, whatever other types of supplies you needed to run the store, where were they getting the things and how was the relationship?

EK: Wholesalers. You take Shimaya Shōten, part of the 'A'ala project. Shimaya Shōten was on River Street, just a block and a half away from the Columbia Inn, so he used to buy as many stuff as he can from the Shimaya Shōten. Fred's Produce came about, but before that was the other produce guys who were all lined up along River Street. Even to the day that we moved to Kapi'olani, my father made it a point to patronize as many businesses in the Kaka'ako area. He bought his tires from Lex Brodie because Lex Brodie's business was in Kaka'ako. I can remember those kind of things. I said, "Oh, how come you didn't buy your tires from the regular service station that you go to?" He said, "Lex Brodie and his people are right down the street over here, they come to eat lunch." But he had the strong feeling of that. That's what happened in that Chinatown area, and that's why people understood when the opportunity is there, you patronize the neighbors.

MK: How about like getting meats? Where would he get his meats from?

EK: Oh, gosh, Wilson Meat. Plenty meat companies, but these are all wholesalers. I remember the guy coming in with the whole side of beef, delivering from the side entrance. I used to stand there and I used to watch Shima take apart that whole side of beef. Every cut that comes out becomes something and all the scraps become hamburger. He had a boning knife and a big saw, and he used to take apart this whole side of beef.

MK: You mentioned that your dad went into the [United States] Army a little while, right, and he learned meat cutting?

EK: Yeah.

MK: Did he utilize that skill in his business at any time?

EK: I believe so, yes. And, the person who taught him how to cut beef was this guy from Kaua'i. His name is Hirata, Yoneo Hirata, who served with him in the—I think my father was working in the Officers' Club at Shafter, and after hours he used to be at the restaurant. So, he served his time, during the daytime in the army, and nighttime he used to be running the restaurant. Double-duty. How he did it, I don't know.

MK: When you say like the Officers' Club, was he doing like restaurant work then, for the Officers' Club?

EK: Yeah, but not as a waiter, he was the meat cutter over there. I don't know how he worked it, but I can recall him describing that at one time, that's how he learned how to cut. He said, "Yone Hirata taught me how to take apart the carcass."

MK: This is kind of related. I notice your mother and you both mentioned veal cutlet, in the old days, restaurants had veal cutlet, nowadays we don't see veal cutlet that much.

EK: It's too expensive, it's more beef cutlet. As a matter of fact, at Columbia Inn-Kapi'olani, we used to serve beef cutlets and we made it a point. It was beef tenderloin cutlets. One

of the funny stories about that was my Aunt Betty, my mother's younger sister used to type the menu every day. Every single day she used to type the menu. And one day, of course, her husband is the chef, right. One day the beef cutlet, "breaded" beef cutlet, came out "dreaded" beef cutlet. (MK laughs.) Naturally, the newspaper guys, who are natural proofreaders, spot the thing over and, of course, it appeared in [Dave] Donnelly's column and all that kind of stuff. But no, it was always known as "veal cutlet" because in the past they used to actually use milk-fed veal, whether it was true or not. There was probably not much truth in advertising during those days, but that's what it was known as. I don't know where veal cutlet came from, the breaded veal cutlets. You see today, in many Italian restaurants you see veal scaloppini. Veal scaloppini really is a breaded veal. The veal is sliced thin and pounded out and you drench it in egg wash and milk, and then you bread it, and then you melt cheese over it. That's your veal scaloppini. But that same way, so instead of putting the cheese and all that kind of stuff, you put gravy on the darn thing. Is that how it came about? I don't know. But, it became a standard menu item.

MK: It's a staple, yeah, in these restaurants?

EK: Sure, yeah. Everybody ask us, how come we didn't serve Okinawan foods and we always say, I don't think there was a market for true Okinawan foods. But today, there are a few Okinawan restaurants that you can go to and Hide-*chan* [Restaurant] is a real famous.

MK: Hide-*chan*, Kariyushi . . .

EK: Very new, Kariyushi, and the other one . . .

MK: . . . Sunrise . . .

EK: Sunrise.

MK: . . . and Ukage.

EK: Yeah. You look at the food, you go, "Oh wow." *Goya champuru*.

MK: I know I asked someone that question, how come Okinawan entrées were not served at his restaurant, and he said for his restaurant it was a matter of storage. He didn't have enough space to be keeping oxtail or pig's feet.

EK: I think to a degree that's true, but to another degree it's just wasn't marketable. And, too, it took more talent, I think, to produce it on a commercial level. Maybe at home, you know when you make pig's feet soup at home, you don't care if the meat fall off the bones and everything else. When you're going to serve pig's feet soup in a restaurant, order by order, you got to make sure that somebody got the right amount of pig feet and the thing looks like pig feet. You follow what I'm trying to say.

MK: Yeah.

EK: And there are techniques on how to do that and that's where your chef comes in. But then, the menus were very American. I think our industry taught people that when you go into a restaurant, that's what you expect. That's what I think. I don't think people just came off the street and said, "I would like to have veal cutlet." They would have had to experience that at one place and they're looking for it at another. How many times you went to Wisteria, Flamingo, Alakea Grill, Likelike, Kūhiō Grill, Columbia Inn, and so on, how many times you walk into there and you look at the menu and see all different kind

specials and you come back to, "I like veal cutlet." (Laughs)

MK: Yeah.

EK: We sold more of that. But then, we introduced—not introduced—but we had Japanese food alongside. The shrimp tempura but not served in the traditional Japanese style, the *teishoku* style, more American. Two scoops of rice, the tempura, dipping sauce, and a hot vegetable preceded by soup or salad or both, and ended with a choice of desserts and a drink. But it was still a Japanese meal served in an American *teishoku*, if you will.

MK: Americanized.

EK: That's right.

MK: I was wondering, I don't know if you know, but in the old—nowadays when we think of Columbia Inn-Kapi'olani, to us, it's family restaurant, family dining, yeah?

EK: That's right.

MK: The Beretania one located in the slums, was it family?

EK: It was the same thing. Even if it's located in the slums, remember, there were thousands of people living in that area over there. Columbia Inn-Beretania did not have a parking lot. So where did all these people come from? From the neighborhood. It was a neighborhood restaurant. And then the word got out and people used to seek that restaurant out. I don't think we ever promoted ourselves as a family restaurant, but families used to come there.

MK: So the younger ones going there from the time they were young could adopt certain expectations of what a restaurant. . . .

EK: That's right. So when they have their own kids, they took on the same kind, they seek those kind of restaurants out. That was the success of all the restaurants, what we call a group of family restaurants. I think, with our chef George and his talents, and my father's willingness, I think when we moved to Kapi'olani, I think both of them try to take it another step above, another cut above, another level, just by the presentation. It used to be everything on one plate, the hot vegetable used to always come on a separate plate. The old restaurants used to have a slice of bread and the butter right on top of it. We made rolls and it came in a basket and we used buttery patties. It just changed it a little bit. The plates were bigger. But the same style, the complete meal, the complete meal syndrome. You don't find that too often today, because one, it's too much food, people are eating lighter, and two, it would be too expensive today. And the trend today is *à la carte*.

MK: They give you that choice.

EK: Yeah. And in fact, a lot of places have a mini plate, knowing and understanding that people are eating less. But, the food itself and the selections was relatively—to the point where I used to see fresh corned beef and cabbage on people's menus on Fridays. Clam chowder was obviously a Friday dish. Hawaiian plate used to be on Thursdays. So many restaurants used to serve *lau lau*, *kālua* pig with rice, with *lomi* salmon on a Thursday. I mean, those things became a standard. As far as Columbia Inn goes, when we moved to Kapi'olani, certain items were served on a certain day. Pig's feet soup on Wednesdays for

lunch and dinner and late night. Oxtail stew was on Wednesday. Now, if we serve oxtail stew on Thursday, everybody get upset, including the likes of Senator [Daniel] Inouye. But, I think it was like that at the old Columbia Inn, the original Columbia Inn on Beretania Street. It became kind of a routine, but then there were specials added to the menu that changed daily.

MK: I was wondering, in the old days when your dad and mom were working at Columbia Inn Beretania, did they frequent other restaurants to see what other restaurants were selling?

EK: Yeah. My father was famous for doing that. Sunday nights, every other Sunday night or around that frequency, sometimes maybe once a month, I can recall us going to Mesamashi, to Kiraku restaurant, another Japanese restaurant. Big occasion days, we used to go to Evergreen, that was a biggie. That's tablecloth, everybody had to comb hair and wear long pants and everything else. Going to Flamingo, I mean, Ala Moana. Remember? This is long before we moved to Kapi'olani restaurant. My father used to take us—for one thing he used to teach us guys how to behave in a restaurant, I can recall. But, I can recall us going to other restaurants. And the funny thing is he always knew the owner of the restaurant. He was very famous and he never—years and years later, Mrs. Perry, Kathleen Perry at Willows, told me, "Oh, your father was in the other night."

I says, "Oh, he must have gone to the football game."

"Yeah, he came, he had a few drinks, he went to the football game and he came back. He had dinner and he ended up because our bar was so busy, he ended up in the back of the bar washing glasses." (MK chuckles.) Typical barkeep, and that was my father. He was everybody's friend. I guess that was his nature (chuckles).

MK: You know, when he went to some restaurants or other restaurateurs came to your dad's place, were meals given out free or extra given or courtesies given to fellow restaurateurs?

EK: Naturally, yes, for the most part. Because there was always a reciprocal thing going on. I can recall my father going to, he went to some event on the Mainland, and the owner and manager of Pearl City Tavern went along too.

MK: Fukuoka.

EK: Fukuoka, George. They became famous friends. George was another one like my father, promoter, the monkey bar, the organ, the lobster—you know the fresh Maine lobster? George knew how to strip that lobster down so deftly that it became a show. But that's the real true restaurant operator. Today things have changed because the chef is now the star, which is, I think, really nice. I think the chef needs to be recognized, but in the past it was the restaurant owner/manager that was really the star in the front end of it. And fortunately, my father, I guess, taught himself at the old restaurant and saved all of this up for the new restaurant. Now, we had to move from the Downtown. Urban renewal. "Slum clearance" some people call it, but it was the Model Cities program with City and County of Honolulu.

END OF INTERVIEW

Tape No. 40-16-2-02

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Eugene Kaneshiro (EK)

Honolulu, O'ahu

October 18, 2002

BY: Michiko Kodama-Nishimoto (MK)

MK: This is an interview with Mr. Eugene Kaneshiro at his office in Honolulu, O'ahu on October 18, 2002. The interviewer is Michiko Kodama-Nishimoto.

So, first of all for today, a question is, what was it like being a kid in a restaurant family?

EK: The restaurant Columbia Inn was located Downtown at Beretania and Tin Can Alley—actually, today, Maunakea Street. And so, that whole back streets and all the alleys and so forth and so on was like a playground for me. River Street, Kukui Street, 'A'ala Park and all that area. And my father for some reason sent us to Island Paradise School, which was located at the old Mun Lun School facilities where Island Paradise School rented. The address really was Kapena Lane, which was like between Kukui and Beretania, running parallel to Kukui and Beretania. And, there was a back alley that took us up Kamanuwai Lane and up to the restaurant. So, it was school in the morning to the afternoon, and then sometimes we would stop by at the restaurant and hang around the restaurant waiting for a ride home up in Liliha.

I guess, typical of a lot of restaurant families, the kids were exposed to the restaurant, the kitchen. And in our case, by that time our restaurant had a bar. I can remember going downstairs into the dark storeroom and seeing all the food stacked up over there. And, watching the workers in the kitchen, like our then-chef, Shima—Seikichi Shimabukuro, we used to call him "Uncle Shima"—watching him dress a whole side of beef, taking out all the different parts for the steak and for the stew meat, and all the other parts to grind up to make hamburger and things like that. We used to watch the fry cooks fry up eggs and hamburger steak and everything else. Watching the dishwasher and not realizing that was hard work, but just knowing that there's somebody washing dishes. So, you get exposed to all of that. My memories are good memories that go back, never really knowing that restaurant business was that hard work. However, it was our life.

My mother, for a while, worked at the restaurant. While we were growing up, my mom was really a housewife, taking care of myself and my two brothers. I can remember my father working very long hours. We were always told on Saturday and even Sunday, not to make too much noise because my father was sleeping in the morning until late morning, having come in long after we were asleep. I can remember him coming in two and three o'clock in the morning, and usually he got up at about nine, ten o'clock. Knowing that only during the weekends, because during the weekday we would have all left for school already. One of the other pluses that we had was my big uncle Frank

Gentaro Kaneshiro, on his way to the restaurant he used to come and pick us up and take us to school. So he was our private chauffeur because his work was right next door to our school. For many years, he used to stop by—I kind of like forgot now, I believe by seven-thirty [AM] we had to be ready because school started at eight and he used to drive us down to Island Paradise School. It was really a family thing. When we went home my mom was always there, so we were very fortunate in having grown up—my father being in his own business, I guess, was able to afford to allow my mom to stay home and care for us.

MK: With your dad working such long hours at the restaurant, was he able to participate in, say, weekend family activities or attend events that you and your siblings were involved in?

EK: I guess when you have good times with your parents, you remember these things and it's clear as a bell for me that my father did make time. And too, however, he used to also do the chores around the house typical of a father, caring for the yard [and] everything else, until later when we were able to help and were assigned chores to do. But I can remember him baiting us and say, "Okay guys, we're going to go to the beach at Ala Moana Park." We had neighbors that were about the same age as us and we were all boys. There was like half a dozen of us and he used to tell us, "Okay, help me clean the front part of the yard and then we can all go down to the beach." But we're talking about four and five o'clock in the afternoon. We know that about seven or eight o'clock, after a short nap, he would be going to the restaurant to work—back to the restaurant to work. I guess, typically, his hours were like ten, eleven o'clock in the morning making sure that he's there for lunch and he's able to do whatever he needed to do in the early afternoon, and late afternoon he was able to stop on certain days. Weekends were precious for us. Sundays were always the day when we managed to see him and do things, go to the park, especially. Every so often a Sunday night dinner at another restaurant, you know, was the biggest treat. These were not fancy restaurants, these were just ordinary restaurants, almost everywhere in town. But in and around Chinatown and College Walk, River Street, there was a lot of Japanese restaurants along there.

MK: What were the names of the restaurants?

EK: Oh gosh, Kiraku was one on Beretania, Mesamashi was another one, there was one next to the Toyo Theatre, I kind of forgot the name over there. You know, the biggest treat used to be when we used to go to Evergreen Restaurant on Kapi'olani Boulevard. I remember going to the Times Grill, I remember going to Flamingo, Alakea Grill, even. There was Honolulu Grill right across the street from the Fort Street fire station.

But, my father, I guess managed the time for us. Being three boys, and of course my mom ruled, she was the boss, which was okay by us, I guess. But my father really made the time for us. You know, as busy as you are in the restaurant business and I can relate—we may talk about this later—but I can relate to how I was buried in the restaurant business and almost missed the growing up of my own daughter. Spending so much time in the restaurant, I can recollect my father struggling to make time for us. The restaurant business was demanding on the owner/operator. I think all families who run restaurants, will come to realize that. And then, too, however, in the later years, it's the family getting involved and actually going to the restaurant to help in various ways. Not necessarily as active people on a regular schedule. But being able to, like when I got a license, I was the guy that had to go down to the, wholesale bakery and pick up pastries there that was pre-ordered and deliver it to the restaurant by a certain time, so that the restaurant will have

pastries for the evening sale and also for morning. And so, it made us part of the support group the restaurant needs to enable them to satisfy the customers and everything else.

MK: When you folks were real small, coming home from Island Paradise School, going to the restaurant, were you folks helping in any way at the restaurant?

EK: Not necessarily, except, maybe we were more in the way than anything else. However, I can recall my father teaching me how to give change. Gosh, I wish he was here to confirm this, but I thought that he had a chair that I could stand on, so I can operate the cash register and actually collect and give change properly. Today, giving change in the retail business, you got cash registers that tell you exactly how much change to give, but during those days, it was a mechanical machine and you had to know how to give change. And it's second nature to me. I cannot really believe that people don't know how to give change. If somebody gives you a twenty-dollar bill and ten cents and try to figure out exactly how much change your customer will get back. So I can remember that. I know my number-two brother, Dennis, who's couple years younger than I am, I remember him pitching in as a dishwasher at the old Columbia Inn. What I can remember was, he was asked to peel some shrimp in between washing dishes, and he had an allergic reaction and swelled up. So, I can remember those kinds of things. My brother Norman was too young to help at the old Columbia Inn, but he started with me some years later at the new location of Columbia Inn-Kapi'olani. It was a place that we went to, and so I have memories of that, but not necessarily to work on a regular schedule or was dependent on being there. I think the restaurant was a little bigger, that needed professional help more than family.

MK: I notice sometimes when I go to small Chinese restaurants locally, I see the children of the owners sitting there in one of the booths or tables doing their homework. How about you folks?

EK: Yeah. I cannot remember. Maybe because I never did homework too much (chuckles). But I don't remember homework as such, I may have, because we were waiting for a ride home and usually the owner/operator of a restaurant has a thousand and one things to do. Or, if he had to go and take a quick run to the bank, I would be tagging along with him walking down Maunakea Street. But I don't remember doing that, I can't remember. I think for us, homework was on the kitchen table at home, more or less, with one or two of us there or somebody else in the bedroom doing their work there. I don't think it was more than that. It was more hanging around, waiting to catch a ride home.

MK: You mentioned that the chef, the cook, Seikichi Shimabukuro, you referred to him as "Uncle Shima." What was your and your siblings' relationship with the workers?

EK: I guess my father, in trying to teach us how to respect elders and all that, it was never first-name basis. It was either Aunty so-and-so or Uncle so-and-so, and so forth, even though they were not related to us. Yeah, the employees that worked for Columbia Inn at the Beretania Street location and also the other ones, were very long-time employees and therefore, I guess we, subconsciously or unconsciously, just treated them like family. And, they treated us like their family, too. So it was really a two-way street.

MK: I was wondering, too, because your dad was so busy with the business, how much business work did he bring home?

EK: I don't recall him bringing home any kind of paperwork. I think he was pretty well

organized in terms of what he did. You know in a small restaurant, you don't have an accountant at your fingertips, you don't have an office staff. I remember he used to type the menus. And he used to type the menus right in the front counter of the restaurant while he was cashiering and overseeing the restaurant operation. It was that kind of restaurant where it was not an affront to the customers for somebody to be banging away at a manual typewriter typing out menus, and then running 'em off on this Spirit duplicating machines, you know, that purple lettering and all that. I believe that he did not bring home work. And he never talked much about any problems at the restaurant or anything like that. So we don't know, I think we only saw the good side of the restaurant. The fact that we can walk in there, and most of the customers and the employees would know who we are, and we knew who they were. And we were able to eat virtually almost anything we wanted to, but I can't remember us really taking advantage of that. But, no, my father, I can't remember him bringing home work as such.

MK: You mentioned that he would type up his menus and then use the mimeograph machine to duplicate. How often would he do that? On a daily basis?

EK: Oh yeah, menus were done daily. I would guess that sometimes he would do a few ahead of time because the chef would already know what they're going to put on the menu. These are daily specials and regular items that go on the menu and this is a supplemental sheet that was pretty much typical of the kind of menu format that most of the restaurants that was owned and operated by Okinawans do. In fact, we even used the back of the menu, after using the menu for the day, as scratch paper. So you can find a lot of things on old menus and if you flip over, you go, oh, here's my father's business plan to purchase the new Columbia Inn on Kapi'olani. And in fact, I came across that, and I have that as one of the cherished memorabilia that I came across.

MK: I noticed that sometimes the old-time restaurants would have menus also on chalkboards or somehow written up, displayed. Did Columbia Inn display menus or primarily had hand outs?

EK: I think the restaurant was bigger than your typical mom-and-pop type restaurant, which almost required them to have menus available on the table. They didn't have a host or hostess because they're very informal restaurant, but you sat down and there was the menu on the menu-holder. And, it was pre-printed and on that pre-printed menu there would be a clip-on that would show all the daily specials and some of the regular items that were more popular, I guess. It would be all priced out accordingly.

MK: As a kid, what were your feelings about your parents being in the restaurant business?

EK: I thought it was good. I didn't have any regrets that my parents were in the restaurant business and maybe because I ended up in it too. But we were never, at least I personally, was never ashamed of the fact that my mom and dad were in the restaurant business. In fact, I was pretty proud of that fact. The Columbia Inn, the original Columbia Inn on Beretania Street, was a very successful restaurant. The history that goes back in 1941 through the war days and after that, the restaurant was very busy. And 1950, my father put a bar in there and the restaurant got even more popular. I didn't know that when I was growing up. I was born in '45, and so I was five years old when that bar opened. But by the time 1955 to 1960 rolled around, I kind of knew what was going on at the restaurant, having been exposed to it. I was always proud of the fact that we had a very busy restaurant, but never realized the impact that that restaurant Downtown in the middle of the slums called "Columbia Inn, the Gem in the Slums," I never knew what the impact

was on the community. That's a real interesting thing. Sometimes when you're deep into it, you don't really know the impact that you make. And then, you look back, after all these years, you look back and you say, wow, my parents ran a restaurant that served American foods and they were of Okinawan ancestry, second generation in Hawai'i, along with his older brother who was an issei essentially, first generation, and they ran this restaurant in the middle of the slums. It must have been tough. It must have been rough-and-tumble, but they were successful at it to a point where when the time came that they had to move from that location and go into a new location, the transition was like night and day in terms of customers. But the basic way of running a restaurant was already tried and proven for my father and his older brother, and they took it to a very successful level. I look back at this whole thing and I tell myself, "Wow, that's one accomplishment."

MK: Before we get more into the Columbia Inn-Kapi'olani, I want to still keep you in your youth. I want to know where did you grow up?

EK: Let's see, I have some very early recollections of us living on Miller Lane. I couldn't have been more than four-and-a-half, five years old. I saw pictures, but more than the pictures, I have stuff that I remember that we cannot find in pictures. Apparently, it was good times, so I guess I can remember those things. But Miller Lane is where the [State of Hawai'i] Department of Education building is today. Behind our house we could see, through the bushes, we could see the governor's tennis court, and that's where the first recollection that I have. My mom and dad used to walk from there to Columbia Inn-Beretania Street. They told me that during the war days, they had to walk around the governor's mansion. That's where I grew up first, and then we moved to Liliha. And so, going to school from kindergarten to eighth grade at Island Paradise exposed me to the restaurant.

I can remember being in the restaurant and a policeman would be sitting in the restaurant and he used to tell me, "Hey, boy, go out to the sidewalk and look how many lights are blinking." I need to explain that police on the beat during those days, and I don't know what year it was, they used to have these red lights that used to be hanging in the middle of the intersection. If you look at Beretania and River Street, one long block from the Columbia Inn, you would watch how many times the light would blink and it would tell you what beat the headquarters is trying to contact. And so, if the red light would flash three red and a long pause and two red, it means thirty-two. And if the policeman sitting there in the restaurant eating. If he is beat thirty-two, he would have to go to a phone and call in the headquarters and find out what's up because they're looking for him and wanting him to go and take care a problem or a concern. And, I can remember that there was a silver call box located on the telephone pole in front of the restaurant, and the police had a big key and he would be able to open that box and crank up and use this telephone that was linked to the headquarters apparently, and he would get his assignment that way. Those are the kinds of things that I can remember. I don't know how old I was, but I remember the policeman telling me, "Hey, boy, go out there and count the lights." and I used to go out there and do that. So those are the kinds of things that, I guess, I can remember that we used to do when we used to be hanging around that restaurant over there.

MK: You spent a lot of time in that area, near the restaurant after school, right, so you got your ride home. As you said, it was known as the slums. You have a burlesque house in the back. In the early days maybe before your time, I don't know, I was told that there was prostitution business upstairs, and a lot of tenements, and all kinds of people there. And

your mom said that she felt real safe over there. But as you folks were growing up there and frequenting the area, what did you folks or your parents think about you folks being there?

EK: You know, ignorance is bliss and I guess innocence is bliss, too. We never knew of too much of the bad side over there. Yes, we've seen fights and arguments and those kinds of things. I think, that was a fabric of that whole community. However, maybe one advantage was, the Columbia Inn was really a gathering place at Beretania and Tin Can Alley. People from all walks of life used to come in there, and my father was able to befriend them. It was their dining room, and it was like neutral turf. I guess one of the advantages that I had was I look exactly like my father when I was young. I was able to walk all around through that neighborhood and people would recognize me. Either they were watching out for me, or I don't know, I felt safe.

Because, I can recollect the time that my friend and I, a guy named Herbert Morikawa, I can never forget him. We were classmates at Island Paradise, kind of lost track of him. But I can remember his parents used to run a produce distribution thing along River Street or Kukui Street somewhere along there. And, I remember he and I wanting to go in a store and steal candy, so we were planning this. The moment we walked into the store, the Chinese person who owned that restaurant, looked at me and says, "Hi, you Toshi's boy. You want candy? Which one you want?" And he offered to give us the candy and here we were planning to steal candy from that store. What would happen if I ever got caught doing that? My father probably kick me in the river. Kick me down Nu'uanu Stream.

But, I remember walking around Chinatown by myself, going into any store and looking around, and was kind of a natural thing. I remember catching the bus from my Liliha Street house, the HRT [Honolulu Rapid Transit Company] with the electric wires above. So it must have been when I was still pre-teen. Being able to get off at 'A'ala Park and walk from there up River Street and up Beretania, knowing where to go. I guess people never bothered, but it never bothered me to do that. Of course, I had a lot of friends in and around that area over there that we went to school with at Island Paradise. I guess because it was a school that was nearby. And so, it was comfortable for me. I think it's because of the way my father ran his business and treated the people through all the years. The people wanted the Columbia Inn to be there for them. I guess in that sense we were fortunate, but I really think that my father cultivated that.

MK: You mentioned that you had your friend Herbert, whose family had a business in that area and he also went to Island Paradise. Were most of your friends near the Columbia Inn area or back home in Liliha?

EK: Well, if you went to a public school you would go to a school nearest your home because it was by district. When you went to a private school like Island Paradise, my fellow classmates came from all over the place. However, apparently there was a number of students that went to Island Paradise that came right from that area. And, whether some of them lived in the area and some of them had their family business in the area, so we were able to associate with each other. I remember going down River Street looking at all the produce companies and where the peddlers used to pick up their food and they would go off to deliver. I remember looking at this game that they used to play over there. They used to put all kinds of different vegetables and stuff on the scale, a big scale, and they wouldn't turn the scale on, in terms of weighing anything, until everybody came back from their routes. But in the meantime, they were all sitting there looking at this and they

would put bets. They would bet on how the total weight of the items that's on that scale. I guess the scale had a lever that you turn that would set the scale in motion to give the actual weight. You leave a head cabbage, what can I remember? I remember one slipper, cucumber, several carrots, a whole bunch of things on this floor scale. It's a balance-type scale. And they would bet, I was told, who can guess the weight of all the items on there. And so, they told me that they do that in the morning, and in the afternoon when everybody comes back to wash their trucks out and so forth, they would declare the winner. Those are the kinds of things.

I remember, I don't know how to spell it, but it's something called *chifa*. It was a numbers game. I was told that somebody used to hide a number in the tree in 'A'ala Park and runners used to go throughout. It's a numbers game. It's illegal gambling, but nevertheless, it was an interesting form of entertainment. I remember the waitresses asking each other, "What was the number today?" 'cause they all put their money down on a number. The runners used to come around and they used to pick up the bets. And then later on, they used to come and make the payoff. When the waitresses used to go—and my mom was one of them I guess—I remember them sticking their head out the front door of the restaurant and looking down the street at the tailor next door and say, "What the number?" you know, (MK chuckles) and it's interesting to hear those things.

You got to remember now, this is where all the pool halls were, all the dance halls were. And that house of prostitution you talking about, it ended after the war, but, during the war and long before my time, it was legal. But, I can remember some of the things. Like the dancehall guys, the musicians. I never knew what a mandolin looked like and I thought it was a funny-looking guitar, and this Filipino man who played it said, "No, this is called a mandolin. So later on you come down to the dancehall, come to the side door, and you come look."

So I said, "Okay." And I did.

He told me, "Come inside."

First time I ever seen a mandolin.

I remember a whole lot. I was very free to walk around that area over there, even in the evening. I guess by the time I was in high school, a lot had changed in that area. By the time I got into high school, many people began to move out from that area over there because that Model Cities Program—the federal grant that was used [for] what some people referred to as slum clearance—was used to redevelop that whole area. That Beretania, River Street, and, I guess, the College Walk and up to Vineyard [Boulevard], Kukui [Street], that whole area where the Chinese Cultural Plaza is, all the way to the undeveloped place on Alakea Street today across from [St. Andrews] Priory. That's all part of this Model Cities Program. It moved out a lot and tore down a lot of the tenement houses over there, so a lot of families moved from there to different locations.

And so, temporarily the tenant mixes was very different. They really didn't know what Columbia Inn was. A lot had changed, so it became a little bit more, you had to be more cautious in that area over there. I would guess around the years of 1962 to 1963, or thereabouts. And, I guess that's what moved us, my father, to make a decision as to whether he's going to go work for somebody or whether he's going to go and find another location and move the Columbia Inn. He and his older brother Gentaro, I think, saw that they still had the family that's dependent on that business. And I guess, my

father could have worked for anybody in this town and helped them make their business successful. But I think he really wanted to be in business for himself, having learned a whole lot by running a restaurant there, had the confidence in going to a new location.

MK: You mentioned that because of this urban renewal, Model Cities, your father eventually decided to relocate Columbia Inn. But I was wondering, did urban renewal directly affect the old site? Was it torn down?

EK: Yeah. The building that we were in, we were renting from the Wong family. And this Wong family developed the Mānoa Marketplace and that area there. My father always told me that Mr. Wong—I'm thinking it's Richard Wong, but not the Senator Richard Wong—but that Richard Wong was a very good landlord to my father. Unheard of, he said. During the later years before we had to move from that location, Mr. Wong came and told him, "I notice business is not that good anymore because there's not that many people in and around this area." Because all of the other buildings were being torn down. So he said, "I think I better not raise rent on you. In fact I think I better lower the rent on you." So, in order for him to survive, for the restaurant to survive. I remember my father telling me that. I don't know why he told me that, it must've been him talking out loud, showing his appreciation for that. But he always said that Richard Wong was a good landlord to our family. Yes, physically, the buildings in and around the restaurant were being torn down. We were one of the last blocks to be torn down, I guess, where we were located. Maybe because we were a viable restaurant or maybe Richard Wong managed to ask the city to hold off as long as possible. But then, when you start tearing down the tenement housing and the housing actually, you lose your base of customers. So, something had to be done. And the sales were down, I would assume, and so forth. Eventually, because the building we were in was torn down, we were ready to move to a new location.

(Taping stops, then resumes.)

MK: We were just talking about the reasons why your father decided to move. I was wondering, you were real young, you were a 1963 grad from McKinley [High School], right? And Kapi'olani Columbia Inn opened '64. At that age, being a high-schooler, were you aware of these impending changes or worries your parents might have had?

EK: Very much. I think my mother and father were very open with us, letting us guys know. Especially my mom who used to tell us, "Hey, don't irritate your dad because he got some major decisions that he has to make." And she tried to explain to us, he's trying to decide whether they're going to look for another location or whatever. I can recall them talking amongst themselves about locations. My father used to tell my mom and we used to listen and all that. I cannot remember where, what locations, but I know it was on his mind. [Nineteen] sixty-three, June, is when I graduated from McKinley, went to University of Hawai'i for a year, and found shooting pool and racing cars was more fun and never finished other than that. I went to business college Downtown and then joined the army and was in Army Reserve. In between all of that I started to work with my father when I became twenty-one years old in January of 1964.

MK: I was wondering, when you graduate from McKinley High School . . .

EK: Actually, January of '65 is when I started with him because January 7th, when I became twenty-one. Legally I could work in the restaurant.

MK: I was wondering, when you were like a senior in high school, what aspirations did you have? What were you thinking you were going to do?

EK: In senior year, the only idea was I was destined to go to University of Hawai'i. I wanted to major in business, that's all I can remember. I didn't like accounting. That was something that I could never see myself doing, but other than that, I don't know. As I said, we used to go out shoot pool till late at night, we used to go race car, fix car, and all that.

MK: What were your parents' reactions to this?

EK: I don't think they appreciated it one bit, from what I can recollect. The moment I stepped into the restaurant because they needed help at the new restaurant, I think my father really wanted me to finish school for sure. But, for some reason I just never—I got too interested in the restaurant. And once I got real serious about it, I think I began to learn a whole lot. He was a good teacher, he wasn't one of those lecturer types. He always used to sometimes challenge me by asking me questions, "What would you do? What would be a better idea?" I can remember those kinds of questions. I can remember my father having very sound policies. Like he would never stand for a waitress who didn't have her hair up. He would never stand for a waitress who came to work without stockings. Yeah, he would criticize a cook for having a real dirty apron, even though they were in the kitchen and sight unseen to the customer. Never having a light bulb burnt out and nobody tended to it. He always used to say, "If nobody changes the light bulb, the place looks like it is not well kept." Those kind of things. And owner/operators of business have only themselves to do those things. You cannot hire a staff to go around just changing light bulbs, so it became a real important thing for him to make sure that all of those things are attended to. I mean, that's how, I guess, he ran his business. His expectation was for us to perform according to his expectations.

MK: Did he ever say how he learned to be that way or did he ever credit anyone with having great influence on him?

EK: I don't know, I couldn't tell you anybody who made any impact on him, because I think I was too young to even understand what that was all about. I'd like to say that he had that sixth sense of being able to manage his affairs with a lot of common sense because I know for sure he wasn't school-trained. I guess that's what it takes, self-made, a high school graduate from McKinley High School, being in the restaurant very, very young age, washing dishes. So, literally, a person that grew up in the business and eventually was given the opportunity to manage the business with a partner, his older brother, who was generally a silent partner, although provided some guidance and leadership, but really allowed my father to operate the restaurant. And then he took us in, my father took us in—"us" meaning myself and my two cousins—and said, "Come on guys, let's get this guy ship-shape," and all that.

MK: Why don't we end here, and the next session I'm just going to ask you questions about your work at Columbia Inn-Kapi'olani throughout the [19]60s through the [19]80s to the final selling of the business.

EK: I can't think of more on the old restaurant, the original Columbia Inn, except to say that the old Columbia Inn had so much character. That's interesting, and it was my father who

was the one that lent the character to it.

END OF INTERVIEW

Tape No. 40-21-3-02

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Eugene Kaneshiro (EK)

Honolulu, O'ahu

December 5, 2002

BY: Michiko Kodama-Nishimoto (MK)

MK: This is an interview with Mr. Eugene Kaneshiro at his office in Honolulu, O'ahu on December 5, 2002. The interviewer is Michiko Kodama-Nishimoto.

So, today we're going to continue with your involvement in the Kapi'olani Columbia Inn from January 1965. So, in January 1965 what was your initial role in the restaurant?

EK: Like any family corporation or any family business, we all start from the bottom. My role was, we do anything and everything that's necessary. I think, somewhere along the line my father told me, "You're going to become one of the highest-paid busboys in town." And I think he was right because I think he knew that everybody had to learn everything when you are part of the ownership. I think my father was an interesting teacher. He never sat down anybody and lectured. But sometimes his comments maybe sounds like he's kidding, but had a strong message. When you young you don't realize what your own father is trying to tell you, you pick it up later on. Like in my role here with the school lunch program—now I've become a manager of a program. Managing people and programs, doing projects and what have you, keeping an operation going. A lot of things come back and say, wow, now I know what the guy was saying. No matter if it was a small little family-type restaurant or if it's a large entity like what I'm doing now, you apply the same kind of things. Some people go to school to learn these things, some people are natural at it, and some people like me had to work hard at it. Because I wasn't schooled in running a restaurant—I wasn't really truly schooled in running a business, so you had to learn sometimes the hard way.

I tried to surround ourselves with professionals, like we had a chef. And my father always believed that if you have a good chef, that's more than half the battle. He's not only going to do the food right, but he's going to make sure that the bottom line, your food costs and everything else, will come along. Our chef in 1964 was my uncle George, I don't know if I mentioned that, he was married to my mother's youngest sister. He was a son of a restaurant owner and that in itself is a whole book. George Uehara, his father was Harry Uehara at Evergreen Restaurant. And George had a brother, and that was Masa Uehara, who was also a chef. In fact, I think Masa became the chef for Zippy's and then became the executive chef for the Flamingo's chain. George was working for the father when, as the story goes, he came to my father—and they're brother-in-laws married to two sisters—and he came to my father and said, "Hey, Toshi, I understand you're gonna open a big restaurant on Kapi'olani Boulevard. I want to be your chef." This is the story that I heard from my father. And my father says, "Oh, but you work for your father and I don't want to take you away from him, so I think I better go and talk to your father,"

which, I understand my father did, and got Harry Uehara's blessing. And said, "Oh yeah, maybe George can try something different, and I understand you are going to open a bigger restaurant on Kapi'olani Boulevard."

And, I believe that became the beginning. And my mom told me many times over that we used to refer to my father as "the chief" 'cause hard to call my father, "Hey, Dad, hey, Dad," in the business, especially in front of customers and employees. And so, my mother and I, we refer to him as the chief. We used to always say, "Hey, what did the chief say?" My father was of the type where, I think he was organized well enough in his own business that he determined that the kitchen door and back would be George's area of responsibility, and the kitchen door [and] front would be his *kuleana*. At that time, he was actually vice-president of the company because his older brother Gentaro was the president of the company. George was given the free hand to select menu items, he used his own recipes, he made his own specials, and so forth. The ideas for celebrations like cherry blossom time and narcissus time and Easter and Christmas and Thanksgiving, all of those seasonal things was a joint effort between my father, myself, and the chef. You always have to involve the chef.

So, from a small restaurant at Columbia Inn-Beretania Street where he did have a chef there, Shima—Seikichi Shimabukuro—who was actually the man cooking all the food, a bigger restaurant required someone with different skills. So, Shima became our number-two man who we call a sous chef and George became the executive chef, and he planned all of the menus, and provided everyone with the recipes, and trained people, and so forth and so on. So, my father, with that confidence in George, they opened in 1964 December. I joined them in '65 just when I turned twenty-one. My role really was cleaning tables, seating people. And, learning how to manage a restaurant by watching, observing, and actually doing, it's an on-the-job training thing. And probably couldn't have a better teacher than that because the restaurant business is not necessarily only serving food. We are part of what is called the hospitality and service trade where it's people to people. We are providing a service and we are also a manufacturer. You know, they actually take raw products and make it into a meal, and we get someone serving the meal with a smile, and then we get paid for it. Essentially, that's the restaurant business no matter how big or small you are, no matter how many restaurants you have, well, that's what it is.

- MK: So your initial role, was it a role that was mostly in front of the house and not the back at all?
- EK: That's correct. My preference was to be front of the house. I was relegated to cleaning the grease trap, and that's back of the house, but then nobody else wanted to do it. When the dishwasher don't show up, we end up washing dishes. It wasn't only myself, it was my cousin Frenchy, you know, whose father [Gentaro] was the president of the company, his younger brother Robert, who was in the business also. We all took our turns, we cleaned the parking lot, we cleaned the restrooms. Because, you know, you may have a janitor working, but you don't have one around the clock. And the restrooms have to be maintained. We even help scrub down the kitchen when necessary, you're shorthanded. And that's what the restaurant business is all about and that's what a family kind of restaurant is all about.
- MK: So, what were your hours like?
- EK: The hours, when you young and single, hours of working and you having fun, you don't count the hours. Maybe that's when I taught myself that you don't count the hours that

you work, you count what you accomplish. In the restaurant business, you go from meal period to meal period, it's breakfast, lunch, dinner, and then we were open twenty-four hours, so you got a late-night rush going on after the bars close during those days. That's what happened. You wanted to be there when it was busy because you had to be there. But you also wanted to be there when it's slow because that's when you want to see how you can improve the business to make it better, or that's when usually the problems come up, when it's slow. And so, you end up being there more hours than you really thought you would be. So typically, a twelve-hour, or sixteen-hour, or eighteen-hour day was like average sometimes. I know twice a week I used to work the midnight shift after working the whole day shift. In between we would take a rest, take a nap in the office or someplace, or go home. But then, I can recall being there till two and three and four o'clock in the morning, and then being back to work at about nine, ten o'clock the next day. And I used to do that every Tuesday and Wednesday, I believe, if I remember correctly.

MK: Were you a salary worker there?

EK: Yeah, my father made sure that all of us family members who work in the business, that did more than their share, was compensated with a salary. We were happy. When you work in a restaurant, you don't have to go out and spend money to buy coffee for coffee break, and buy breakfast or lunch or even dinner. So you get compensated by those things. At some point in my career there he was able to provide me with a car, with the gas and the insurance paid, so that's part of a benefit package for myself. And the medical plans, and so forth and so on, was provided and all that. So, yes, we had a salary. I would say that my father paid us fairly compared to other restaurants. He wanted to make sure that no matter if family or otherwise, we all be like employees and you pay the people for what they're worth. It was fair compensation. We always wish we had more money. But, there were some perks to the job. He allowed me an expense account to go visit other restaurants to see what's happening in the industry. Go to restaurant shows on the Mainland to look at equipment, food, and things like that, you know. I know many restaurant people do the same because you got to go see the whole wide world so you know where your business is going so you can at least plan, although we never did it very sophisticatedly like putting written business plans and so forth. We did it in our own way, and really, that led to the Waimalu restaurant in about 1978, '79.

We began to take stock of what our business was doing. We had just the one restaurant, we had a whole bunch of family involved, we had a lot of mouths to feed, and by that time I was very active with the Hawai'i Restaurant Association. I was the president of the restaurant association back in the years '75, '76, '77, around there, for a couple of terms, and sat on a board for many years. I learned a lot from the other restaurateurs in Honolulu. Especially from those that we became real good friends with like the Asatos over at Wisteria and the Nakos and Hayashis over at the Likelike, Danny Nagamine and his sister at the Flamingo Restaurant, the Chuckwagon and so forth. We weren't competitors. My father had always said, "Another restaurant is not your competitor." Another restaurant is what you gauge yourself against and see what you're doing and if you can do it better and still draw the crowd, that's fine. But our biggest competition was the supermarkets who provided food for people to stay at home or go picnic instead of coming out to eat. They were beginning to enter the prepared-food market where you could buy food that's semi-prepared and go home and eat by just cooking rice. Those were the competition that restaurants faced. He always said, "Look around, look at the number of seats in all the restaurants in this town. They probably represent less than 1 percent of the total population. So if everybody came out to eat, every restaurant would

be overflowing and over-booked." I believe that what he said is true and so we had friendly competition with the other restaurants.

In fact, to this day, we are still good friends, personal friends, especially with Roy and Jane Asato. In fact, my father even invited Roy to go along with him to Chicago for the big restaurant show and told Roy, "You should look at this thing. You should look at it because you go to this restaurant show and you want to re-do your whole restaurant. Open your eyes to what's out there." And Roy did take him up on that and they all went, I had to mind the store. But they went and they had a such a nice time, on the way back they took in a [Los Angeles] Dodgers-[San Francisco] Giants game. And Roy Asato, being a Giants fan, they established a wager and, of course, Toshi lost. The wager was that the loser would wheelbarrow six cases of Budweiser beer from his restaurant to the Wisteria. And so one day, my father made it into a big parade. He had not only the Budweiser people there, but he also had Budweiser get a Dixieland band and some cheerleaders popped up from somewhere. And Roy Asato threw a big, big party at his restaurant to celebrate this. My father paid off the bet by wheelbarrowing six cases of beer along Kapi'olani. They made a stop at Flamingo Chuckwagon, and had a beer there, and continued on and went straight up Pi'ikoi to the Wisteria. He managed to attract all three TV stations and all the newspaper reporters and photographers, and really made a whole big thing out of it, but shared that whole thing with his competitor restaurant called the Wisteria. In the meantime, I'm the horse. I'm the guy that got the wheelbarrow, made sure the beer go into there, made sure we made a wooden ramp so he can go up and down the curb from one sidewalk to the other, and worked with Roy at the party at the other end, and made the contact with Budweiser and had them hire the Dixieland band, and so forth and so on.

My father was and ended up to be the PR [public relations] person for the restaurant by default because he was the owner, but also because he was good at it. And I did mention that people, like the public relations people in this town of yesteryear, the likes of Frank Valenti and . . .

MK: Ray Milici.

EK: . . . Ray Milici, and those guys, they used to refer to him as the dean of restaurant public relations. It was an interesting time. And then that's how I learned the business. And then my exposure with the restaurant association and that led to the Chamber of Commerce board, the Hawai'i Visitors Bureau board, I was elected twice for two or three terms, something like that. That's how I began to meet people, learn about other businesses and try to apply it at my own restaurant.

MK: And your father encouraged that kind of involvement.

EK: He encouraged it, and he told me if we are members we should be involved and believed that because he was one of the forerunners to the Hawai'i Bar Owners Association or something like that. He was always in favor of those things. So that's what kept me going and became involved.

The Waimalu restaurant was planned in '79, and the Waimalu restaurant was so that we could spread the costs of supporting all of the family members and, of course, improving the business. We looked for a location and we decided to go where the population [might be suitable], maybe we were just a bit ahead of our time. Taking the experience that we learned from the Columbia Inn at Kapi'olani and applying it to a new restaurant, we built

ourselves a Cadillac out there at Waimalu on Ka'ahumanu Street near Kam[ehameha] Highway. My longtime friend George Fukunaga, Servco Pacific owner, used to sit there on our counter in the morning at Columbia Inn-Kapi'olani and I used to pick his brain about expansion and things like that. That's how I taught myself about the business world. George shared with me a study that was done for a property near the place where we wanted to lease, and when I saw the demographics on that, it convinced me that's where we should go. I used to drive up and down the streets in the Newtown and Pearlridge area looking at the houses, looking at what kind of cars people own, looking at the bumper stickers to figure out if they work for government or if they work for private business or what, just to determine what kind of people live there. It kind of confirmed the demographic study, the professional demographic study that George showed me. And we made a decision to lease a place on Ka'ahumanu Street and really built a big restaurant. That restaurant cost us about two-and-a-half million dollars for the building, furniture, fixtures, equipment, and a startup fund. My father took ill about eleven—we were in construction for eleven months—so just after we started construction, he was diagnosed with cancer of the esophagus and that thing spread. S&M Sakamoto finished the project ahead of schedule and within budget, and we were able to open the restaurant in July of 1981.

The day that we were ready to open the restaurant my father was in ICU [Intensive Care Unit] and I went to visit him before I went out there to open the restaurant. And the reaction that we saw on the EKG [electrocardiogram], even though he was in a semi-comatose condition with all these machines on him, he acknowledged. My cousin who was his doctor, Owen Kaneshiro, saw the EKG move and he says, "Yeah, I think he understands and he knows." So we went, with that as his blessing, we swung open the doors and invited everybody in. We had a fair day when we opened that restaurant, I can recollect. And, by the time we hit one or two o'clock in the morning, my younger brother Norman and I was trying to open the safe for the first time. We never opened the safe and we had a handful of money that had to be put away and can you imagine two guys trying to open one safe at 1:30 in the morning after working a whole day with all the excitement of opening a new restaurant.

Well, and I had thoughts about stopping off at the hospital to see the chief, and let him know what we had a successful day, but I decided that I was too grubby. So I went home and then just after I got home I got a call and my mom and my other brother was with him when he passed away. So, the day after we open, well, the day we opened, essentially, is when my father died. With his knowledge, and with his blessing, and hopefully with all his lessons that he gave us, he decided to forgo this and let us guys do the thing. Needless to say, we closed the restaurant for a couple of days and attended to his funeral. And you know, the tribute was probably one of Hosoi's largest funerals they have ever seen at their premises. Over 2,000 people that we know came, the line was going through the mortuary, and across the parking lot, and was going down Nu'uanu Avenue.

And that's what the restaurant business is about, I guess, when you get people together. So that left myself, my cousin Frenchy, and my younger brother Norman, my mom, that's probably the four people of the family left to run the restaurant, to operate the restaurant. And Frenchy's father had passed away already, Gentaro had passed away already. His mom was not active in the business. So here we are now with two restaurants and burning the candle on both ends. One restaurant doing fairly well, but the ambassador of that restaurant is now gone. The memories of him linger but the true spirit of the restaurant is gone. I was the operator, and now I'm trying to open and run a new restaurant, and so, I

had to split my time between the two places. Try to establish ourselves in a new neighborhood out in Waimalu, trying to prove to everybody that we're pretty close to what it is at Columbia Inn-Kapi'olani, but we quickly came to realize that there is only one Columbia Inn-Kapi'olani. To duplicate the feeling will take time and I don't know if we had the patience for that. But still, we were a family business, an Okinawan family at that, trying to make ends meet.

It was the cost that ate us up, especially the interest rates. Some people don't believe me when I tell them that. But in 1980 and '81, prime interest rate went to 23.5 percent and we were paying 2 percent over that prime for our take-out loan. And that had to be refinanced and so, whereas we were supposed to be paying around \$28,000 per month mortgage, it was really about [\$]34,000, \$35,000—[\$]6,000, \$7,000 more than we expected. That really set us back. The reserves couldn't hold it. We tried it for a number years and then we eventually said we need to sell this or we're going to get hurt.

That's essentially why we sold the Columbia Inn. The Japanese corporation called Kyotaru out of Tokyo, was interested in the Kapi'olani restaurant and the property there, and we wanted to sell the Waimalu restaurant so we sold it as a package. They, essentially, bought the restaurant with all its debt and everything else. So, our family didn't really profit that much from the sale of the restaurant. However, the profit that we had is that we had known that we had a successful business there. It was run by our family, and yes, we made a lot of mistakes and maybe made a big mistake at the end, but we all learned from it. I don't think anybody got hurt and, believe it or not, the family is still together. My cousin Frenchy, his brothers, two sisters and a brother, my two brothers, my mom, my auntie on the other side, and the rest of the Kaneshiros, we get together quite often, we see each other. And yeah, in a sense, maybe we failed, but as they say, nothing ventured nothing gained. Do we want to do it over again? I don't know (chuckles). I get tired when I think about it. You asked me earlier how many hours we worked, sometimes I look back and think about it, and I say, "How did I ever do that?"

MK: I was wondering, because it was a family-run business, were there any times when you could say like a regular paid employee, "No, chief, I'm going home," or "No, chief, I think I did enough." Was that an option at any time?

EK: I think it was an option because my father tried to run it as a business and treat everybody not like family, but treated everybody like an employee. I think, in that sense, and I hope that I did the same, too, in thinking back about it. Yeah, there were many times when I would say, "What am I doing here? I'm supposed to be the owner of this restaurant and I'm cleaning the restroom at eleven o'clock at night on Saturday night when all my friends are out playing and having a good time. I'm scrubbing the bathroom because somebody barfed all over this place." I mean, gosh, I think about those times when the dishwasher never showed up on the midnight shift. Somebody got to wash the dishes and the cooks all looking at us, and saying, "Well, I hope you no tell me I got to wash dishes." So you end up having to do it, and they all jump in and they start helping you and so forth and so on.

(Telephone rings. Taping stops, then resumes.)

MK: So, you were just saying that you had to do things like cleaning the bathroom and helping with the dishes when the dishwasher didn't come, and the others would sort of [help] because you folks were helping.

EK: Yeah. You think about it and you say, "Man, did I do that? How did I do that? What mental state was I anyway?" But you do what you have to do. I was just telling a friend of mine, my father used to always say, when he sees a light bulb out in the dining room or on the sign on the outside of the building, he always used to say, people judge how well the place is managed by seeing if the sign is on at the right time or if there's a light bulb out or not. He never say, "Hey, go change the light bulb." In that sense, I really had a good teacher. Sometimes, yeah, I would rebel if he tells me, "Ey, go sweep the parking lot." But if he told you that, you know, one of the first things a customer sees is the parking lot. So, if the parking lot attendant is half-sleeping or the parking lot is unkept, it reflects on who's managing the operation. Not so much in that many words, sometimes more abrupt, but I don't think he told me, "Ey, sweep the parking lot" [directly]. Because I cannot remember him telling me that, but he told me why you have to clean the parking lot. And maybe he wasn't telling me to clean the parking, maybe he was trying to tell me to get somebody to clean the parking lot, but then when you look around, there ain't nobody around in the family business, you are it. And if you the youngest, like I was, until my younger brother Norman came on board. That was a family business.

If you look back at all the other Okinawan families that operated restaurants in this city of Honolulu, going back in the [19]20s, [19]30s, and [19]40s, they all did the same. Their restaurants, I don't think they had enough income to support a full-time janitor, so who cleaned the bathroom? My mom told me one time that she thinks my father used to drop a five-dollar bill every now and then in the women's bathroom just before closing so that the waitresses would go in there and take a look around and at the same time, clean the restroom 'cause they knew that there was a five-dollar bill sitting down at the back of the toilet over there. And she thought, "I wonder if the chief did that?" I got to say that, I had a real good teacher.

MK: He was really quite masterful then, dealing with people.

EK: And yeah, he had strict standards that I had to continue. But I had a hard time because, here, I'm a young person trying to tell older waitresses and cooks how to conduct themselves. "Keep your hair short." "Put your hair up." "Clean apron." "Wash your hands." Here, I'm a young person, you got to imagine now, I was like between twenty-five and thirty while I was already managing at that time 175 employees, full- and part-time.

MK: How did you think your employees treated you, because not only are you a young manager, but you are the son of the owner.

EK: I am family.

MK: How was it . . .

EK: It was very hard. Yeah. I had to prove my worth, I had to make sure that I'm not exerting myself because I'm family. My father had the easy time because naturally everybody respected him. So when he say, "Jump," they always said, "How high?" But here comes a young whippersnapper taking over. So, I had to prove myself. I had to work 110 and 120 percent, which I hope later on when people judge me, can say, "Oh, yeah, the guy did his thing." I can say one thing—and my wife, I think, recognized this—that whenever we go somewhere and we bump into a longtime employee or even an employee that worked for us a short time. And it's been a couple decades now since we left the restaurant because it was 1981. Yeah, it's twenty years. I have never had somebody come up to me and say,

"You guys was terrible owners, you guys never give us nothing." I cannot recall ever having to confront somebody like that. Granted, we did lay off people because they weren't performing, and so forth and so on. Maybe that's a testament to how we managed our business and learned from the chief, you know. I'm hoping that I can continue to transcend that with what I'm doing now.

MK: What do you think made the transition the way it was from your father's time to your time?

EK: I don't know if I mentioned to you about this workshop that we attended. It was actually a mini workshop. This was in Chicago, this National Restaurant Association. They had this workshop put on by this man named Danco, D-A-N-C-O. I'll never forget his name. His workshop focused on family-owned restaurant and the family corporation. We sat in on a sampler. It usually goes four or five days and it costs about [\$]5,[000], \$6,000 for a family to sit in on his workshop, but he was giving a sampler. And one of the things that he said stuck with us, my father and I. My father was thinking about it through that whole week, until the day that we were flying back from Chicago to San Francisco. And he mentioned to me and he says, "You know that guy what he said was, there's got to be a time when the first generation got to graciously turn it over to the next generation," which was myself and my cousin Frenchy, and give us enough rope and hope that whatever they taught us would continue. They would jerk the rope every now and then to keep us in line because they are still the senior partners in the business, but this guy Danco said, "The first generation need to understand that they need to let the second generation take over and be responsible." If you let them take over, but no responsibility, you setting them up for failure. If you give them the business and still micro-manage it from the side, you setting yourself up for failure. He says, yeah, everybody going make mistake because first generation already made those mistakes, but you can head 'em off at the pass. It was an impact workshop that we went to and that's when my father, month later, one day sat me down and said, "You know what? I think I'm going to ask you to become the general manager." I don't remember him giving me the title, that's the interesting part. But, essentially that's what it is. He said, "I'm going to put the business in your hands." He said, "Big uncle—that's Gentaro—allowed me to run the business. Now I'm going to turn it over to you. I'm going to ask Frenchy to help us, and I'm going to ask your brother Norman to stay on, too. I'm going let you make the decisions from now and you do it your way and I'll just watch you from the sidelines." In so many words, that's what came out. I believe it came from that workshop that we went to.

MK: So did he abide with that and just kind of let you do it?

EK: Yes.

MK: He stepped aside?

EK: Yeah, but he stepped aside from the day-to-day operation of the restaurant and essentially became like the ambassador, like the man who shakes everybody's hands and say hello and so forth. Maybe that led to his demise, we don't know. Because at that point, my father was drinking a little too much. My mom and I always used to say, "Hey, we better stop the chief and cut off the drinks already," because he was fair game every time he went out of the restaurant. My father was still young at that time, though, you know. He died a month short of sixty. He turned the thing over to Frenchy and I when he was not even mid-fifties, early fifties. We were essentially operating the business for him, and of

course, he was there every single day. He was there night and day, that was his living room. He was the restaurant.

But still, the operation side of things was myself and my cousin Frenchy. My cousin Frenchy worked hard, too. He pulled the hardest shift. He knew that I was raising a family, I had a daughter, an only child. But, even at that, I was so married to the business that I look back and I tell myself, "Wow, man I missed the best part of my daughter's growing-up years." I used to take her to school and after that never saw her. I used to see her sleeping when I came home at night, but that was the life of the restaurant business. My wife tells me a lot about that, too. She said, "Yeah, you missed the best part of her life." She always tells me, my wife always tells me that.

I think what the lesson here is, not lesson, but I guess the experience here is that those Okinawan families, first- and second- and third-generation families and now even the fourth-generation, they all went through this. A lot of them saw their parents working so hard or they had experienced the fact that they were there washing dishes, cleaning tables, scrubbing the kitchen, washing the toilets, and all those kinds of things, I think that's what drove them to go out of the restaurant business and make something out of their lives in another field. The educational opportunities and so forth became available because their family could afford it. You know, I really believe that, yeah, improving the stock, sure but, improving them in a different area. Because, yeah, you can make money in the restaurant business if you know how.

Maybe us Kaneshiros, we were maybe too generous. We give away more stuff than we kept, but I think we lived a comfortable life and we were happy with what we were doing. It was a fun restaurant. The Waimalu restaurant was a nightmare because we had to learn something, a whole culture, about how people lived out that way. The weekdays was slow and weekend was too busy. And, yet at the Kapi'olani restaurant, it was busy all the time, steady from day to day. It was the Okinawan families that stuck together. You hear stories about families breaking up because of finances and all those kind of things. I think we were blessed with my father and his older brother, who were able to make sure that we respect each other even though we were co-workers and saw each other on a daily basis, and we are still family. That kind of stuck well with us.

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDE TWO

EK: My father passed away in '81. I sold the restaurant in '86, and I got out in '90.

MK: I was wondering, did your father ever encourage you to not be in the restaurant business, knowing how much he had to work? Did he encourage you and your siblings to not be in?

EK: I don't remember him ever discouraging us from getting into the restaurant business. When he opened the Columbia Inn-Kapi'olani, that restaurant was so busy, you wouldn't believe it. I really think that he was happy that myself and my cousin Frenchy stayed with him, or at least I joined him. I really believe that. He never did tell me that straight in my face, but I do think so. I think maybe the proof of that is the fact that he eventually turned the restaurant over to us.

My number-two brother Dennis, he went away to school on the Mainland, got his accounting degree and became a CPA and joined a mid-size firm in Oakland, lived in Albany, California, and stayed there. He wasn't involved in the restaurant at all, but my youngest brother [Norman] declared one day that he don't want to go to school after high school. He just said, "I'm not going to go to college. I gonna go work." And so, I had my friend Jackson Nakasone who was general manager of the Oceanic Floating Restaurant and I told him, "Give him a job and teach him how to be a restaurant person." My brother did, and then later on he reluctantly came to work for us and I taught him how to be a manager. And that boy was a natural, and so he was in the business with me. I don't think my father discouraged us, nor did he openly encourage us. I do think that he always reminded us that even you are family, my expectation is more. In so many words, that's what it was.

George Fukunaga told me once, he said, "You know, you have plenty family working in your restaurant."

I said, "Yeah."

He said, "You need to expect 110 percent out of your family if you expect 100 percent out of your employees." So, no, my father never discouraged us. In fact, maybe he did encourage us in his own way.

- MK: You mentioned what Mr. Fukunaga said, you have all this family working in the restaurant you have to expect 110 percent, even 100 percent from your non-family workers. In the restaurant, on the ground, how did it work out? You have family, you have non-family, working under high pressure.
- EK: You have to treat everybody as employees. Everybody would be subject to the same rules as everybody else. A clean shirt, clean shave, smile, you know, service with a smile, and all those kinds of things that are applicable to any restaurant whether they're family or not. Our customers, the customers knew who was family. But then, we had employees that was there for so long that they thought they were part of our family. I mean, this is the most amazing thing. Maybe today in this age it may be very paternalistic, but during our time, we knew every cook and their girlfriend or their wife. We knew every waitress and their boyfriend or their husbands. When I used to interview people for job, especially front of the house and especially the wait-help, the women, I used to always ask them after we declared that we going to hire them, I used to say, "Does your boyfriend approve of you working here?" Or, "Are you just trying to run away from your husband?" Because we need to know what motivates you to come to work and we don't want somebody to be here because they're just running away from their household responsibilities. I think they understood what we were asking. We set the tone. When a new person comes on board, we try to team them up with an old-timer so that they feel comfortable and they can be invited into the group. Even when they eat lunch, we tell them, invite everybody. So yeah, how you differentiate from family and employees, ours was very different. Well, maybe not that much difference from other Okinawan families that ran restaurants.
- MK: You were talking about, you have all these Okinawan families running restaurants, sometimes things don't work out, right? In your case things work out, family still together. What would you attribute this success to? Not just the monetary success or the business success, but the success in keeping it together, basically.

EK: Got to be the fact that between my father and his older brother who set the example. So now, how did they do it? I never really thought much about it until recently when we were talking about the Okinawan restaurants going back about a year and a half or so. Howard Takara and the whole bunch of us started to talk about this project. I always was thinking about it. How come I hear other families—when we searching for who owns what restaurant and so forth and so on, we find out this part of the family not talking to the other part of the family, so we cannot get them to come and sit down with you to do an interview. And, there was some bad blood somewhere along the line or some misunderstanding that led to. I said, “Gee, how can these guys—they’re family and yet they mad at each other to a point where decades later, they still mad at each other.” I just cannot imagine that because it never happened to us. And so, I got to thinking about it and I think we had to work at it. There were times when, yes, you don’t agree, but then you have to always say—but then, they’re not forced to agree with me. So, you got to give a little. And maybe it was my father’s nature. Hopefully he taught me that somehow and it’s kind of like my nature. I said, “Well, you want to try it? Let’s go ahead.” Sometimes when you allow somebody to promote their idea, they work hard at making it successful. So, Executive Management 101: Let the employees make the suggestions. Maybe they’ll suggest exactly what you had in mind. But if it’s their idea, so what. And, so we left it at that, I think.

MK: You were mentioning that Columbia Inn eventually was sold to Kyotaru, so after you folks sold it, was there still some sort of relationship with Kyotaru?

EK: Yeah. The sale of the restaurant included a contract for specific people to work on a contract for a minimum number of years. They offered it to our chef, George. They offered to myself, to Frenchy, to my brother Norman, and even my mother. We were involved. And my mother’s sister, who was our chef’s wife, and their daughter, Judy. And so, they asked all of us, actually the principals in the business, to sign a contract and also to sign a non-compete clause. I think was like one year in the state of Hawai‘i or O‘ahu or something like that, which is pretty typical, normal.

As family, we are bound together by blood. And so, I guess my father and my uncle got along so well. Remember now, this is the oldest half brother and the youngest, and maybe the oldest felt that he was obligated to take care of the youngest. The roles reversed as the oldest became older, the youngest said, “I got to take care of big brother.” So, that’s a real interesting thing. You making me think now. But, what was the glue? I think the glue was really the relationship between my father and my big uncle. I hope that between Frenchy and I, we being the oldest of the two families, will continue to keep that in our lives as we grow older, too.

MK: And then, one last question. When you pass the site of Columbia Inn, do you flinch? (EK chuckles.) Do you feel something?

EK: Let me tell you, maybe because I worked so hard in that building, the things that I remember is when I look at the parking lot, I tell myself, how many times I swept that parking lot when that monkeypod tree dropped all the stink beans and they stuck to your shoes and everything else. I think about all of those things. I look at the roof, and I tell myself how many times I was on the roof when it was pouring rain because all the monkeypod leaves was clogging our drain and the water was spilling out and so forth. I had a nice phone call from one of my good friends from the newspaper building. And he love his beer, he’s a New Zealander, his name is Russ Lynch, he’s a business editor, business writer for the [*Honolulu Star-*] *Bulletin*. And, typical New Zealander, he loves his

beer. He called me. We used to call him, "Edgar, the Unsteady" because his name was Edgar Russ Lynch. We call him "Edgar, the Unsteady." He called me one day and says, "You know Gino, I can go to the sidewalk and enter that used car lot office and know exactly where the round table was positioned." And he said, "I would love to bring my own beer and walk in there." No, "I would love to walk in there and stand approximately where that round table was and say, 'Ordering.'"

(Laughter)

And he would order his beer. Yeah, mixed reactions on my part. The Servco people know their business, they bought it, and they have every right to do whatever they want with it. A lot of people call me and tell me, "Oh, the *pōhō*, they make that place into a car lot, a used car lot."

I say, "No, no, it's 'pre-owned.'" (MK chuckles.)

That part of my life is memories. I have no regrets. I drive by there, my wife says the same thing.

(Taping stops, then resumes.)

EK: I think you were asking whether I had any feelings, or what is my feeling about when I drive by the old Columbia Inn. A lot of fun memories come back to me because it was a fun business. I may have a different feeling when I drive by the Columbia Inn-Waimalu because it was really work and there was a lot of stress and pressure and everything else because there was a lot of money riding on that thing over there. And really, to be very honest and frank, it was probably our demise. But as I keep saying, nothing ventured nothing gained. But, my wife, I think, points out to me and says, "Well, they made a fancy used car lot out of that place over there [on Kapi'olani Boulevard]." I always think to myself, I wondering if we can make more profit running a restaurant or them selling used cars. But then, when you sell one car, that's all. We would take two months to make that kind of profit, so I don't really know. But, I really think that we've done our time, we had a lot of fun. And you know the irony of this whole Okinawan restaurant project? I don't believe any of the Oroku restaurants are in operation except for one obscure restaurant called Bert's Cafe. I don't really even know if that's open on a regular basis, on McCully Street.

MK: I know where it is, by Polo's Market.

EK: That's right. All of us have moved on. But there are a lot of Okinawan families that still run businesses, but as far as the Kaneshiros and the restaurant called the Columbia Inn, it's history. The name lives on because someone is using that. Somebody bought the name. I hope that they will respect that name and keep it. Maybe the theme might change because maybe it may not be a sports thing or something like that, but I just hope that the restaurant will have the kind of feeling that we had, the hospitality, the service, the quality of the food, and the real fun times that we had.

MK: Okay, we'll end it here.

END OF INTERVIEW

The Oroku, Okinawa Connection: Local-style Restaurants in Hawai'i

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